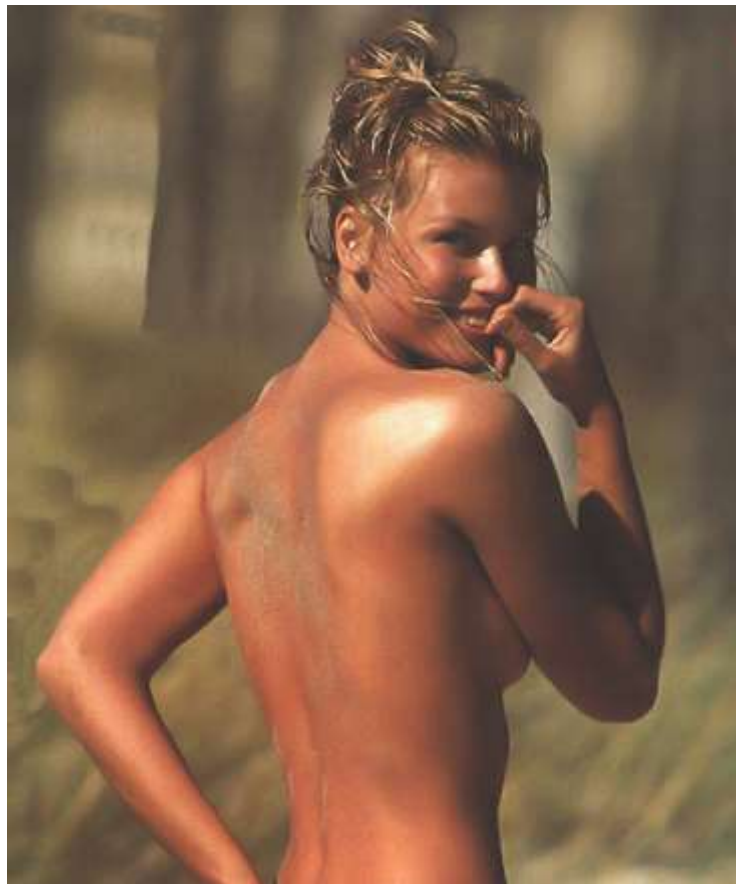


# **Empress of the Dawn**

## **Book One: Feodor**

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With Velvet Belle Tree and Tarot Barnes



Prologue

There were people in later centuries who got the story all wrong.

To begin with, Kalla was never an empress. The rulers of Andros never called themselves emperors, or even kings. They were patriarchs.

Furthermore, she was never a reigning monarch, or even a legal consort, to any of the patriarchs, although she was Companion to three of them and advisor to several who came after.

Nor was she hailed from her advent as the savior of her adopted world in a time of trouble, Indeed Kalla's passionate relationship with Patriarch Feodor came close to destroying the dynastic alliance he had carefully fashioned to unify the planet.

Close.

But *only* close. Together, they managed to make the best of a bad situation and, after a brief war, established a lasting new order. Everyone began to forget about that close call in later generations, as Kalla helped bring her world progress and prosperity. They forgot about it entirely after she led its defense against the Aurean Empire in the Battle of the Triple Moons.

By then, everyone knew about Velor and the Velorians: the Golden World, and its living goddesses – renowned throughout the Seeded worlds for their supernal power and beauty and passion.

But when Kalla set foot on the world then called Romaia, she was the first of her kind ever to see another world. Nobody there had ever heard of Velor. Hardly anyone anywhere had. Even the Scalantrans, who opened the trade in Companions, knew little about the planet and its people, nor could they have foreseen all that would come of what – to them – was simply a business arrangement.

You have to forget everything you know about Velor and the Enlightenment and the Empire if you are to understand the true story of Kalla. You must see her as she was at the beginning: a young girl, embarking on a journey into the unknown. For the universe was then as unknown to Velor as Velor was to the universe.

# Part One: The Journey

## 1. Breaking Orbit

Strange red creatures on a strange ship. Walls and floors and ceilings of cold gray metal. No sky over her head, no dirt beneath her feet.

Kalla Zaver'el's education as an acolyte to the High Priest of Skietra had taught her about things like the existence of other worlds, but nothing about life on a starship. She knew only what the Scalantrans had told her and the others, and that was only what the aliens thought they *needed* to know.

The gravity felt just like Velor's. They'd been told about that at the outset. About how Velorian gravity was around six times the average for human worlds, about their strength being accordingly greater to cope with that gravity – more than accordingly;

indeed, about tenfold the human norm. Homes, furniture and everything else on Velor had been designed around that fact – not that Velorians had ever thought of it that way. But here...

Other than that, there hadn't been a lot, except about what they were there for. Non-Velorian men, it seemed, had been found to think very highly of Velorian women. A wealthy man among them would pay a great deal to have one as his companion – a companion who could provide him with sexual pleasures greater than those of any other woman. This would be of great value to Velor, for their world had nothing else of value to trade with the Seeded worlds of the galaxy.

Kalla had not volunteered for this, nor had any of the other girls. Velorian women did not volunteer for jobs, or sexual liaisons, or marriage. They did what the men told them to do – they had no other choice.

One of Kalla's duties as an acolyte was to share the High Priest's bed whenever he ordered her to do so. Of course, she was not his only acolyte, nor did he bed only acolytes. And sometimes he liked more than one at a time... And if a subordinate priest did something to please him, he'd lend him acolytes as a reward. Occasionally, if a worshipper gave an unusually large donation to the shrine, she was given to him for a night.

The other Companions-to-be weren't acolytes, just ordinary girls whose fathers had been convinced that giving their daughters to the cause was the patriotic thing to do. Only Kalla among them hadn't been given by her father. Her father had given her to be an acolyte and now the High Priest had given her away. She didn't know why he had done that. At seventeen she'd been studying her duties for two years. She could assist

in the rituals flawlessly. And she had become very skillful at pleasing the priests sexually.

She had found the religious rituals boring but had joined in her sexual duties with increasing enthusiasm. More and more priests specifically asked for her as a reward. Perhaps the High Priest was annoyed at having to share her so much. Or perhaps he had tired of her incessant questions when he explained the arcana of the religion and worship of Skietra.

Kalla looked at the other girls and could see that they were even more nervous than she was. It was fear of the future, fear of the unknown. And, although life on Velor was not often a happy one for a woman, it was the only life they'd known.

They didn't know what the worlds they would go to would be like, what the men they would be indentured to would be like. But then again, they had no choice of the men they would have lived with on Velor. Before marriage they were sexually free, but at seventeen, that part of their lives was over. That was the age at which a Velorian girl would be married off to a man who made a bargain with her parents – she had no say in the matter. And after marriage, a man would often offer his wife to his friends as a show of friendship or to someone with whom he wanted to make a business deal or for any reason that he wanted.

But Kalla knew that they wouldn't mind a husband giving them to another man, just as she didn't mind being given to priests or worshippers. There was something about Velorian women, physically and emotionally, that made it impossible for them *not* to enjoy sex. They didn't know why, but they were glad of it; it was the most enjoyable part of their lives, the part that made everything else they had to endure bearable.

Yet Kalla knew why. As an acolyte, she had been taught the secrets of the creation of the Velorians by the Galen. She knew that the Galen had engineered them to be the mothers of their children. And that the Galen enjoyed a vigorous sex life, a sex life they enjoyed even more when the women were wholehearted participants who enjoyed it as much as they did.

Once, Kalla had asked the High Priest why the Galen had made Velorian males, if they only wanted Velorians to be the mothers of their children. He had given her a sharp look and then said: "To teach them how to please a man." She'd thought about that, but had decided that it sounded like a good excuse for the High Priest's extensive sexual activity with his acolytes.

But the questions that Kalla asked the High Priest that seemed to annoy him the most were about where the Galen were and why they had abandoned the Velorians and not used them for their sexual pleasure and the mothers of their children. He would only answer that somehow the Velorians were flawed, that they hadn't pleased them. But that didn't satisfy Kalla. *If the Galen were so powerful, why didn't they make us so that we were flawless and could please them?*

Only, she never asked him that. By then, she had known his anger, and was afraid that if she did ask, his anger would be greater than anything she'd want to experience. When he was angry he would shout and make her feel stupid and inadequate. And there were menial jobs usually assigned to novices that he could make her do.

Kalla did not know any of the other girls. She had never seen any of them before meeting at the entrance to the shuttle. There was no time for introductions. They had all

simply been escorted there – she by a priest and the other girls by a father or brother. Just before they embarked, the priest gathered them around him and said: “May Skietra be with you.” And that was it.

They entered the shuttle, found seats and fastened their seat belts as they were instructed. Kalla was relieved at the smoothness of the takeoff.

Kalla saw that some of the girls started to talk to each other and thought they might have already known each other. Then the girl next to her turned to her and said in a loud voice: “You came here with a priest. Are you an acolyte?”

Kalla noticed the other girls turning to look at her.

“Yes,” she answered. “I’ve been an acolyte to the High Priest of Skietra.”

“Then why are you here?”

Kalla shrugged. “Who knows why a man, especially the High Priest, does what he does?”

The other girls laughed. Then they started asking her questions, expecting her to know more than them, expecting her to be their leader. But she knew little more than they did. She couldn’t answer most of their questions, but she realized that they seemed more relaxed.

Soon, the shuttle docked with the Scalantran ship. None of them seemed to want to be the first to board. “Please Kalla,” one of the girls said. “Would you please go first?”

Kalla had no choice. She didn’t want the others to think that an acolyte of the High Priest of Skietra was just as scared as they were. So she walked into the ship and the other girls followed her.

They were greeted by a tall red creature with huge eyes and six digits on each hand. Kalla had been told that the Scalantrans weren't human and looked very different from them. But no one had bothered to describe them.

"Welcome to the *Bountiful Voyager*," the creature – Kalla couldn't tell whether it was male or female – announced in strangely accented Velorian. "I am Jusalem, the Trade Captain. We have prepared two sleeping chambers and a common room for you. We hope you will be comfortable."

She paused for a moment. Kalla couldn't read her expression, but from her next words she imagined it must be stern.

"Please be very careful in your movements, as your natural strength is far greater than this ship was designed for," Jusalem said. "Once you have settled in, we shall reset the artificial gravity in your accommodations and the connecting corridor to the Velorian norm. Over the course of our journey, we shall gradually adjust it to a level more typical of human worlds, in order to accustom you to what you will experience in your new lives there, and to assure that taking care to behave accordingly will become second nature to you."

Another Scalantran, who identified herself as Rosala, took Kalla and the other five girls to a tiny room down a short corridor. There were six mattresses on the floor. That was all. There was a door that Rosala opened to show them a small room with sanitary facilities.

"The common room is for meals and recreation," Rosala explained. It was across the corridor; the six Velorians joined her there a moment later. Rosala explained that the



ship had been stocked with food found appropriate for humans, in sufficient supply for the first leg of their journey.

There was a long table with a dozen chairs. Along one wall, there were slots for heating meals and a cabinet with plates and cups and eating utensils. A push of a button, once they were returned to the cabinet, would activate the cleaning cycle. There was a viewscreen that showed what the ship saw outside.

Velor dominated the screen, orange and brown with patches of drab green. The horizon was curved. That did not surprise her, or any of the others: they all knew that their world was a sphere. But to actually see it, and to know they were leaving it...

Even in the presence of her fellows, Kalla ached with loneliness.

*I will never see this again*, she thought. *Never.*

## 2. Damage Control

“Do the men on other worlds really have hair on their penises?”

“Is that all you can think of, Jaleel?” asked Liessa.

“Well, that’s what I heard,” Jaleel said.

“Maybe we should ask the Scalantrans,” Marzha suggested.

“Do they even *have* penises?” Jaleel wondered.

“They probably wouldn’t even *fit*,” ventured Liessa. “Or be interested.”

“What difference does it make?” asked Rilanna. “*We’re* not going to have any penises, hairy or otherwise, until we get wherever we’re going.”

“I guess we’ll have to make do with each other,” said Jerusha.

That brought laughter among the dozen Velorian women gathered in the common room to observe the *Bountiful Voyager's* departure. On a journey that would last for *years*, their bisexuality would be their greatest comfort and solace.

"We're moving," Kalla said, her eyes having remained on the screen while the others had been distracted by talk of hairy penises. The image of Velor dwindled as the ship broke orbit on its way to what Rosala called a "wormhole," through which it would pass – to emerge in another planetary system too distant to see from here.

What made interstellar journeys so long was the arduous climb from planet to wormhole, and the descent from wormhole to a planet on the other side, she had been told. A number of stellar systems had more than one wormhole, connecting to different destinations. Some of those lacked habitable planets, but served as convenient transfer points along the Scalantrans' trade routes.

As the other Velorians turned to watch their homeworld on the screen for the last time, their chatter died away. Kalla could understand. They must be feeling just like her, cut off from the only world and only lives they knew, knowing nothing of their lives to come.

Only then, suddenly and for no apparent reason, that feeling left her and was replaced by a feeling of lightness and euphoria. The next thing she realized was that she and the others were no longer sitting in their chairs but floating above them.

Kalla wondered if something had gone wrong with the artificial gravity. They had been told that it was artificial, and therefore she knew something might go wrong with it. Things were always going wrong with anything artificial back on Velor.

What were the others thinking? She could not tell. But they looked giddy. At first, they drifted aimlessly; yet, after a few moments, some found that they could control their movements.

As did Kalla. It was sort of like swimming, she thought.

“Haven’t those Scalantrans noticed about the gravity?” asked Jaleel

“Maybe it’s failed only here,” suggested Marzha.

“Then we ought to inform them,” Rilanna said,

She worked her way to the intercom and made to press the button.

Her hand went right through the intercom -- and the wall behind it.

“You *idiot*,” Jaleel yelled at Rilanna. “Didn’t they tell us to be careful? Now we’ll catch it.”

“But I *was* being careful,” Rilanna retorted. “I didn’t press hard at all.”

The other Velorians looked at her, and the wall, in disbelief. Marzha moved in to take a closer look at the damage – and crashed right through the wall.

There was a sound of what had to be tearing metal, and then a staccato blare that seemed to come from all over the ship. The luminescent elements in that wall failed, and the common room was plunged into half-light.

“Now who’s the idiot?” snarled Rilanna.

The Velorians milled about in mid-air. Even in the dimness, Kalla could see that they had smashed several chairs and shattered one end of the table. None of this, she realized, could have anything to do with the gravity. And it couldn’t be just carelessness, to happen only now, to all of them, all at once.

And then she remembered an old dream. It had been a dream of floating in space, high above Velor, the sun shining on her naked body, her body seeming to soak in the sun's energy. She remembered the profound sense of well-being it had given her.

She had even shared her dream with the High Priest.

"That is how you should feel if the Galen returned, and found you worthy," he had told her.

But from his tone, she sensed a doubt in him – doubt of her, even of the Galen. She never brought the matter up again, even when the same dream came to her once more. She thought she heard words this time: beyond gold.

She had overheard something once, whispered among the priests, something to do with gold, and the Galen. Beyond gold – but what was the rest?

She knew what gold was, it was common – so common as to be worthless and, in any case, too soft to be used in tools. But tools of steel could be used to draw it, to make wire to repair electrical circuits – that sort of thing.

There was even more gold, deep beneath the crust, beyond reach, beyond use. But of what interest could this be to the priesthood? The priesthood had no interest in practical matters like keeping the Shrine in repair or the radio sets in working order – let ordinary Velorians do that as part of their tribute, just as they sent their daughters to be acolytes.

Beyond gold. Why was she thinking about that now?

*Beyond gold, we shall fly with the Galen!* That was what she had heard. Had that been just wishful thinking on the part of the Priests? But this was real, and it was getting out of control.

“*Stop it!*” she yelled at the top of her voice, and her voice carried even above the staccato din. “*Don’t move!*”

All heads turned her way.

“In the name of Skietra, *listen* to me,” she shouted. “Something very great and very dangerous has happened to us. We are not as we were on Velor, because we are beyond Velor for the first time ever.”

She paused a moment to let that sink in.

“The Galen must have known this, must have planned for it. If we were made to be their procreators, then surely they would have carried us far beyond our world, as the Scalantrans have now done. And our transformation would have been the same. Gods can surely mate only with goddesses.”

“Goddesses?” Jaleel said, raising her voice as Kalla had. “How can that be? The Galen are gods, and we are only their servants.”

“If we are servants now, it is to the Scalantrans, who came to help our world when the Galen did not,” Kalla shot back. “If we do further damage to their ship, it will not go well for Velor, whatever becomes of us.”

That got them to control themselves. But as Kalla took note of that, something else strange occurred: her surroundings turned misty, as if they were no longer solid. She could see through what was left of the wall, and the floor, and the ceiling. There were moving shadows out there, coming this way...

Kalla shook her head, fearing she was losing her mind. Abruptly, things returned to normal. The shadows materialized into six Scalantrans as they came into the room.

They looked even bigger as part of a group. What would they think when they saw the damage?

Three of them Kalla recognized: Jusalem, Rosala and Jemuna, another of the Trade Captain's staff. The red creatures looked at the Velorians, and at the havoc they had wreaked, and back at the Velorians. Kalla couldn't read their expressions, but she was sure that they must be feeling amazement – and fear.

"What have you done?" Jusalem demanded. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Are you all crazy?" Jemuna added. "Is this how you repay us? Is this what we are to expect of your kind?"

"You have deceived us as to your true natures," Jusalem said. "We have no choice but to void the contract and return all of you to Velor."

"We have deceived no one," Kalla said. "We ourselves have been deceived all our lives as to our true nature. We never expected this to happen. It was a terrible accident, and we are very sorry. But I think I know why it happened, and I think I know what to do about it."

"And what would that be? You had better be right, because if you are not..."

"Do you have any gold on board?"

"*Gold?* Why would you want gold?" Jusalem seemed as shocked by that as by the damage. "You harm our ship and then demand payment in gold?"

"Gold is used for payment?" Kalla asked.

"Yes. On most human worlds."

"I did not know that. It is not so on Velor. But I think that putting it on us or near us here will prevent anything like this from happening again."

“We will discuss this matter, and take appropriate action.”

And with that, the Scalantrans withdrew.

After a few moments, the staccato din went silent.

The next Scalantran to appear before them announced himself as Fraidayn, the ship’s chief maintenance officer. He was quite brusque.

“One among you, I am told, seems to speak for you,” he began.

“That would be me,” Kalla said, knowing that, once having taken the initiative, she must not relinquish it.

“You ask much of us. You had better have good reason.”

“I believe that I do have good reason,” Kalla said, and explained how Velorians seemed to be affected by the proximity of gold.

“Why should that be?”

“I don’t know. I know only that it is common on our world and, it is said, deep within it as well. And that this happened when we left the proximity of our world. I have heard that--”

“Never mind what you have heard,” Fraidayn pressed her. “We are concerned with facts here. Hard facts. Facts alone.”

He had brought with him a small bag, from which he withdrew a circlet of gold with strange engravings, which – very carefully – he handed over.

“Put it on,” he directed her. “Around your neck.”

Kalla saw that the circlet had a hinge and a clasp, and that it was, indeed, of such a size as to encircle her neck. She could tell immediately that it was having some sort of effect. But she had to be sure, and did as he directed.

It was strange to lose that heady sense of well-being and yet to feel relief as she felt the artificial gravity take hold, to know that *its* force, rather than the force of her will, was keeping her put.

“It works,” she told Fraidayn. “It’s a fact. Do you have others like this?”

“Consider yourself fortunate. Nearly all the gold aboard this ship is in the form of specie, essential to transactions on many worlds; or art objects, those being of greater worth than the gold itself. But we have a few dozen of these slave collars, which it now appears are appropriate for the task at hand.”

“*Slave collars?*”

“Slaves are people owned by other people, and forced to work for them.”

*Like Companions*, Kalla realized. *What we’ll be.*

But Fraidayn was still speaking.

“Slave collars, on worlds that tolerate slavery, are generally made of iron. The gold versions were devised on a world where wealthy people like to play master and slave in ‘sexual games.’ We have hopes they may be of interest elsewhere. You will each be issued one. You will each, of course, return it as soon as your contract is sold. We will advise the buyers to arrange for some equivalent to limit your powers. We want satisfied customers, not dead ones.”

And so it was. It seemed funny, wearing those collars with what turned out to be, on close inspection, small images of lovers in various positions. But Kalla and the rest were safely on their way, and the ship itself safe from them.



### 3. Unsentimental Education

Nobody from the ship's crew had wanted to speak with the Velorians for some time after the accident in the Common Room.

*Bountiful Voyager* repair crews had patched up their quarters, and then left without a word. Velorian normal gravity had been restored, but there was no announcement of the timetable for future adjustments, nor any official updates of any kind from the crew. Kalla surmised that there wasn't any love lost for the Velorians on their part. Jusalem and other members of the trade and maintenance staff who spoke Velorian spoke to them as little as possible, and about nothing of importance.

Until, that is, they were advised to gather in the Common Room at a certain time for an important message. Kalla had trouble making sense of how the Scalantrans reckoned time; it had nothing to do with planetary days or years. But she had learned how to read the clock on the Common Room wall.

"We are now approaching your system's wormhole," Jusalem told them over the comm. "You may feel a certain amount of stress as we make the passage. It is perfectly normal. Do not be alarmed. Do not remove your collars."

*Does she think we're stupid?* Kalla wondered. But she suppressed that thought to give voice to another.

"Can you tell us about wormholes?" she asked.

"You wouldn't understand," Jusalem said curtly.

"But I *want* to understand."

"They are tunnels through space that take ships from one star to another. Without them, interstellar travel would be impossible."

“Why is that?”

“Because even at the speed of light, which is the absolute limit in normal space, it would take many generations to reach our first destination. We would all be long dead by that time.”

*Normal space? Did that mean there was abnormal space?*

“Did your people make the wormholes?”

“Of course not,” Jusalem snapped. “They were here long before our kind, or any other species we know. They are said to have been created by a race we call the Old Galactics.”

“Who were the Old Galactics?”

“Nobody knows. It is foolish to inquire about such matters, and a waste of time to answer silly questions. All you need to know is that we make passage one shift from now. An alert will sound at that time.”

With that, Jusalem switched off.

\* \* \*

Kalla and the other Velorians were gathered around the viewscreen, when the alert sounded. But the camera was not aimed at where they were going, only at where they had been.

It was nothing new. Just their own sun, a bright orange spot – that had been a surprise at first, since it appeared red from the ground on their world. It had to do with atmospheric dust, the Scalantrans had explained. As for Velor itself, it was barely visible – just another point of light among thousands.

Kalla wanted to see the wormhole. She had no idea what a wormhole looked like. Then, moments after the alert sounded, the stars vanished, as if a curtain had been drawn over them. There were brief flashes of light – too bright to be stars, too brief for her to take in what they might actually be.

“Boring,” pronounced Rilanna.

“Let’s have some *fun*, for Skietra’s sake,” suggested Jaleel.

That meant, as usual, group sex. Jaleel started in on Rilanna, and Liessa joined in a moment later. Then it was Marzha and the rest, a tangle of limbs, an orgy of kisses and caresses, tongues and fingers making do for penises.

Kalla alone held back, keeping her eyes on the screen, where there was nothing to see but a grayness interrupted only by those brief flashes. Even the sounds of multiple orgasms failed to distract her, although she was aware that her womanhood was wet and willing.

Liessa came up for air long enough to chide her.

“Come *on*, Kalla,” she pleaded. “Be a sport. *Come* with us.”

Jaleel, apparently feeling that actions spoke louder than words, reached out to stroke her between the legs. Kalla gave in then; it just felt too *good*.

As if to make up for lost time, Liessa and Marzha each began sucking and biting one of her breasts, Jaleel, meanwhile, went down on her, licking and nibbling. It was all too much, and her entire body shook with her release. She gave herself entirely to pleasure -- glad to be a Velorian, glad to be in the company of her own kind.

She didn't know how much later it was that she noticed, out of the corner of her eye, that she could see stars again in the viewscreen, surrounding a vast nebulous *something* with a ring of flashing lights towards its center.

\* \* \*

"You didn't feel any stress during the transit?" Jusalem asked afterwards.

"We were busy," Jaleel responded, and the rest murmured in agreement.

"You always seem to be busy at that," Jusalem commented. "That may bode well for our trade, which I am now confident will be quite profitable, despite our recent... difficulties."

"What were we supposed to feel?" Kalla asked.

"Disorientation, even... your language doesn't seem to have any term for the expelling partially digested food. It is common among humans."

"I felt nothing unusual, even before I... joined the party," Kalla said. "But, I was wondering..."

"Wondering what?"

"About the flashing lights."

"The beacons, of course. Starships must follow a precise vector through a wormhole, or risk destruction from its immense tidal forces – forces that your kind do not seem to feel."

"I'd like to find out more about that."

"Whatever *for*? It will not be any use to you where you are going."

"I just want to *know*."

It was the beginning of a conversation, at first only over the comm. But that would change. A lot of things would change.

\* \* \*

There weren't any planets in the system they were crossing now, they had been told – at least, none that were inhabited and therefore worth a stop. It had been a short jump, but the next passage would be a long jump.

“What's a long jump compared to a short jump?” Kalla asked the next time Jusalem appeared on the comm.

“What difference does it make? You're not here to study astrogation. Your lord and master, whoever he may turn out to be, won't care about such things.”

“But / care.”

“Our first jump was a short one – barely a light generation.”

“A what?”

“You Velorians don't know a thing, do you? It's how far light can travel in one of our generations, which is about 13 of your years. A long jump can be ten or even a hundred times that. You can still see your own sun from here, if you know where to look. Where we're going next, you'd need a telescope.”

When Jusalem ended the conversation, some of the other Vels reproached her.

“You shouldn't upset the Scalantrans like that,” Jaleel complained. “You're making us all look bad.”

“They'll probably sell your contract to the most obnoxious man they can,” warned Liessa. “And you'll probably drive *him* crazy with questions, too.”

But it seemed that Kalla couldn't help herself, at any opportunity that came up. Part of her knew that she was going too far, but another part of her, the most important part...

One shift, as they approached the long jump wormhole, she was summoned to a private meeting with Jusalem. It didn't look good.

"I have spoken about you with Travel Captain Targana," the trade captain told her.

Kalla and the other Velorians had never even seen Targana. They knew only that she was stationed at something called the Bridge, which had something to do with the actual operation of the ship, and that he was the ship's authority in all matters other than trade.

*Am I in trouble with the travel captain now?* Kalla wondered.

"You are very impetuous, Kalla. We do not regard that as a virtue. Yet I can sense that you are intelligent as well as curious. I have conveyed that to the travel captain, and he has approved my recommendation."

"I don't mean to be difficult. It's just that--"

"You are only about to begin learning the true meaning of 'difficult,'" Jusalem interrupted. "On my recommendation, and on Targana's authorization, you are permitted to leave your quarters and enroll as a student under our ship's historian, Sulva. You will learn our language, and gain access to our archives, which should be quite sufficient to satisfy your lust for knowledge."

"Thank you," was all Kalla could think of to say.

“Our favor is not unwarranted. You did, after all, find a means to safeguard this ship from your people’s extraordinary and unanticipated powers. I appreciate that. Travel Captain Targana appreciates that. I trust that you can appreciate the need act appropriately in normal gravity; we will begin the scaled adjustments to your habitat for the rest of your people with this passage.”

“I appreciate what you’ve done for me,” Kalla said.

“You may think otherwise before long. What you face now is hard work. It will be difficult learning our language. We don’t have deepteach programs for it on ship – why would we? When your indenture is sold, you can be deep-taught the language of the world where you will serve, but here you will have to learn the hard way. There will be a period of adjustment, just as with the gravity.”

“I understand.”

“There is one thing more. I require that you not discuss the matter of gold any further with your fellow Velorians or the crew of the ship. In the course of your studies, you may come to understand the reason for this. You may even already have an inkling. For now, I will say only that it is essential to our mission. I will speak to you about this at the appropriate time, but only then.”

“Thank you,” Kalla said. “I will honor your trust.”

\* \* \*

“Period of adjustment” was putting it mildly. Kalla had to learn even the simplest words. Head. Mouth. Arm. Leg. Finger. Hair. Wall. Door. Light. Dark. Air. Water. Food. Food was a problem, because human foods were usually called by loan words from

human languages. Once she had gotten as far as she could with nouns, she had to *do* things with them to master verbs and relationships.

Scalantrans expressed a number of basic concepts differently, she learned from awkward conversations with members of the crew. The word for “inside,” as applied to the ship itself, was different from that for “inside” as applied to a room or a house or a cupboard: Scalantrans spent most of their lives aboard ship, after all. Much of the Scalantran syntax and grammar were related to shipboard life.

And there were words that just didn’t have Velorian equivalents. Like Tlax, for the pouches on females where infants grew. “Mate-group” was a single word in Scalantran, and had connotations that simply couldn’t be translated. Yet Kalla learned, somehow, putting nearly all else aside – she was missed at many of the orgies.

Beyond learning the language, however, there were further complications. The terminals for the ship’s archive were designed for Scalantrans, of course, with their six-digit double-thumbed hands. Some access and search procedures called for the use of all six digits, and Kalla was forced to improvise – using an eating utensil with her left hand to substitute for the missing second thumb.

A Scalantran youngling had been detailed by Sulva to help her out, or she would never have gotten anywhere. He was also detailed to continue her practice with the spoken language, which she suspected was a considerable relief to the rest of the crew.

Once fairly launched into the system, she was overwhelmed with the volume and complexity of the archive. Most of the subject headings meant nothing to her, and even those that did confused her at first because they were in Scalantran script and based on



Scalantran names and pronunciations. It seemed to take forever to find the equivalents of Seeders and Seeded Worlds, and even then...

She could have asked for more help, but she didn't want to appear helpless...

\* \* \*

Even after she had mastered the system, she could hardly believe some of the things she found in the library.

"Do people on these human worlds actually *kill* each other?" she asked Sulva one day. "Just as we kill zarks?"

"Just as you kill zarks. And with less reason."

"Do they eat the people they kill?"

"Oh no, they consider that a crime!"

"But the killing itself is not considered a crime?"

"Not if it is part of a war, or in the name of some righteous cause. Not long ago, there was a war of righteous causes on your own planet, was there not?"

"But none were killed."

"There might have been, had the Purists and the Naturalists possessed weapons sufficient for the task. If any such weapons exist."

Kalla tried to deflect his argument.

"The Naturalists tried to destroy the Maternity Engine, but we stood shoulder to shoulder around it and would not let them pass. Our numbers were greater, and we prevailed. Then they tried to tunnel under it, only to instead discover..."

“We have heard of the Dimensional Transporter, yes, and the departure of the Naturalists. Yet suppose they had been unable to depart, and had found means to injure or kill their enemies.”

“That would not have happened.

“Can you be sure?”

When she really thought about it, she had to admit that she could not.

There were other surprises, although none quite so disturbing, awaiting her in the Archive. One of them came after Jusalem announced the first stop on their route.

“We’ll be taking another short jump to our first port of call,” he said as they reached the far end of the system from the long jump exit. “One that connects to the system of a planet called Romaia a thousand light generations distant from your homeworld.”

Kalla had spent many hours researching wormholes. She had learned that there was a whole network linking thousands of worlds. But she couldn’t make sense of the scientific explanations – something to do with what the books called Cosmic Physics,

*I’ll have to learn about that*, she thought. But there were other questions that the books didn’t seem to have any answers for. Neither did Sulva.

“The archive says the wormholes were marked by the Old Galactics,” she pressed her one day. “But nothing about who or what they are or were.”

“Perhaps the Galen would know.”

“You know the Galen?”

“Only indirectly. We surmise that they still maintain contact with First Generation human worlds – those they themselves seeded. You’ve read about those. But any

Galen there assume the outward forms of ordinary humans; we infer their presence from the fact that seeding operations from First Generation worlds appear to be directed by a higher authority.”

Sulva hesitated, as if uncertain of what to say next. But it turned out that she must have actually been uncertain about *whether* to say it.

“We suspect that it was the same higher authority that indirectly directed our first expedition to your world. But... don’t tell anyone I said that.”

Kalla and Sulva had many conversations over the course of the rest of their journey. Towards the end, it was about that first port of call. It had taken three Galactic years to reach it, and it was now the 12th year of the 988<sup>th</sup> Cycle according to a hybrid calendar the Scalantrans had developed for seeded worlds. According to the ancient Terran calendar, it was 1160. But Galactic years were 1.11 Terran years, and because commerce was based on them, Kalla’s indenture would be for 111 Terran years.

*As if I’ll live that long in any case, she mused.*

## **4. Approaching Destiny**

“That is it,” Sulva said, pointing to an insignificant looking star on her screen.

“Romaia, the first planet on which we will land, revolves around that star. In ten shifts we will enter the wormhole of this solar system and exit in that of Romaia.”

Kalla stared at the screen, a puzzled look on her face. There were so many stars, how could they know about Romaia’s? “How did you ever find it?”

“That is not my area of expertise. You will have to ask Henryn, the navigator.”

Kalla shook her head. “No, you misunderstand. I’m not asking about navigation. What I mean is, the first time the Scalantrans went there... How did they know there was a planet there? How did they know that there were people there they could trade with?”

“That is history, that I know. You have learned about the Seeders, have you not?”

“Yes. I know how the Seeders brought people from Earth to many planets. I just don’t know who they are. The Galen told them to do it, didn’t they?”

“That is what we believe to be true. But we do not know who they are either. All I can tell you is that the Seeders have ways of watching the progress on a planet they have seeded. When they see that the people there have settled in well, that they have a good economy and are ready to find out about other planets with a human population sufficiently mature to meet non-humans, they send a message to the appropriate Scalantran Factor General. Arrangements are made for a Scalantran ship to obtain the necessary information about the planet that is to be opened for trade.”

“Do the Scalantrans meet with Seeders then?”

“No. They leave the necessary material at a planet we are already trading with.”

“What about the first time? When there was no planet to leave things at?”

“That is a good question Kalla. It was a long time ago, and I do not know the answer.”

“What kind of material do they leave for you?”

“The first thing is the location of the planet and the most efficient wormhole route. Then there are data sticks containing the basics of the major language of the planet. We

use these to program our deepteach machines. Then there is information about the products of the planet so that we can figure out what we can trade.”

“You mean like different machines?”

“Hardly, Kalla. When planets are first opened up, they are well below the stage where they can manufacture products that more advanced planets would want. Mostly, they export agricultural products. Sometimes they are in the mining stage and have rare minerals that other planets lack.”

“What does Romaia have to trade?”

“Their main product is the oil of a small fruit that they call olives. We have been told that humans like to use olive oil for cooking and for putting on raw vegetables. It seems that a particular climate is needed to grow the trees that the olives grow on and the place on Earth from which the people of Romaia were taken was well known for its olive oil. We have also, recently, started trading for the fur of an animal that lives in the colder parts of the planet. It has coloring which we have been told humans think is beautiful and is also very warm. They call it shinefur. It commands extraordinarily high prices on advanced worlds with a taste for exotic luxuries.”

Sulva was silent for a few moments. Kalla was used to that. The Scalantrans only spoke when they had something to say.

“I have been asked by the Trade Captain to consult with you on an important matter.”

*The Trade Captain wants my opinion? I guess he no longer thinks that I'm empty headed.* “What is it, Sulva?”

“The problem is: Who do we offer first? We do not really know how to go about this. We do not really understand why a man would pay a large amount of money to have a particular woman as his personal companion. But we have been assured by humans that this is the case, when the women are like the Velorians.”

Kalla thought about it. “I think I should go first. I understand men. I think that if I watch the man I am offered to, I can figure out how to act, how to make him want me enough to pay the asking price.”

“And the other girls?” Sulva asked.

“Maybe some of them would know how to act. But they are not as experienced as I am. They’ve just lived at home. And besides... they won’t admit it, but I think they’re scared.”

“Scared? What are they scared about? We saw how strong they are. No one can hurt them.”

“Maybe no one can hurt them physically. That’s not what they’re scared about. They’re afraid of being in a strange place, with strange customs. They’re afraid of being alone, not having anyone to talk to, not knowing how to act.”

“You are not afraid?”

“Yes, I admit that I am afraid. It’s hard having to spend your life with strangers. But I think I can handle it better than they can. After all, I’ve learned to deal with another culture already – haven’t I?”

Sulva made that rumbling noise Kalla had learned was their way of laughing. “Yes, you have done very well learning how to deal with us.”

“Anyway, you’ve told me that I’ll come back to the ship to learn the language and customs. Then I can tell the girls what it was like and tell them how to act. They’ll see that I’m all right and that should give them courage.”

“I will tell the Trade Captain what you have said.”

Kalla was curious about Romaia. But there was little in the main archive – that, Sulva explained, was because trading ships like the *Bountiful Voyager* liked to keep their trade secrets. And what Sulva herself had to tell her wasn’t very helpful. So she asked to speak with Jusalem, and was soon favored with a private audience.

“We are actually dealing with Andros, the principal realm on Romaia,” Jusalem told her. “That’s unusual.”

Kalla didn’t know what a realm was.

“Romaia was seeded with scattered groups of Greeks, Bulgarians, Varangians, and a few other peoples harvested from the European portion of the Romaic Empire,” Jusalem said.

Kalla had no idea what any of that meant, and the trade captain could only point to maps of old Earth, which weren’t any help.

“The scattering of settlements was also unusual,” she continued. “The Seeders usually implant successive waves of harvested humans in the same area, and let them spread out from there. Why they chose differently in this case, we don’t know; but it has impeded unification of the planet.”

Kalla had taken it for granted that all planets were unified.

“A generation ago, Patriarch Basil of Andros completed unification of the main continent through marriage to a princess of the Varangians, who live in the Northern

Reach. Their land is the source of shinefur, and its export value may have been one of the reasons for the marriage.”

Kalla didn't know what to make of that.

“Basil was getting on in years at the time of our last visit. We may find ourselves dealing with his son Feodor. Feodor has a thirst for knowledge, where others seem to have only a thirst for power. When he was a child, he asked us for books from other worlds. We tried to explain that he wouldn't even be able to read them. But he persisted, so we let him have elementary textbooks on science and technology machine-translated into Olympian, which is a form of Greek but not the same as the Romaic spoken or read on his world. By the time of our next visit, he had taught himself to read them and profit from them and...”

“Olympia. That was one of the first Seeded worlds, I remember. And some of the people there are like us.”

“No, not like you. They keep to themselves, especially for mating. They have no choice in the matter.”

“But can't they—”

“They cannot. They are not affected by gold, or anything else that we know of. If you were indeed like them, our trade would have ended before it had even begun. We might as well have transported marble statues for all the use they would have been to our customers.”

Kalla was dumbfounded. But only for a moment. She understood now that she had saved not only the ship, but the mission itself. She would have a chance now. Her fellow Velorians would have a chance. Her world would have a chance.



Jusalem knew Kalla well enough now to read her expression.

“We are not accustomed to being indebted to anyone not of our own kind, as we are to you. And even now, we would prefer to keep this between ourselves. When I first encountered you, I feared you would become troublesome, even though you had saved the ship and – without realizing it at the time – the entire point of our journey. But I have since come to appreciate your patience and dedication; Sulva’s reports have been quite illuminating. I think that your qualities will stand you in good stead on Romaia.”

“You may be in my debt, but I am more greatly in yours,” Kalla said. “I feel that I have a new life opening up before me. I had none on Velor. There was nothing to hope for there, and without the access to technology that this trade will bring to my people, there would be no hope for our world. We would remain forever ignorant and isolated, more primitive than the least of the Seeded worlds.”

“Thank you. You have eased my mind on this matter.”

“Tell me more about Romaia.”

Kalla sat with rapt attention as Jusalem continued her account of the world, even though it was confusing at times. The people called themselves Romaioi, for example, in memory of a time when their realm back on Earth had been centered in a city called Roma. But the Romaioi hadn’t ruled Roma for centuries at the time of the Seeder abductions, and the language they spoke was not that of the ancient city.

Romaia – well, Basil’s realm there – had been opened to trade shortly after his ascent to the throne. Perhaps the Seeders had anticipated that it would some become one world. The *Bountiful Voyager* had been awarded trade rights there, in any case; with a growing number of seeded worlds opened to trade, it was sometimes necessary

to reassign mature worlds to newer ships, with the more experienced ships taking on newly opened planets.

Jusalem wouldn't say just how that was arranged, but she'd talk about practically anything else. Kalla knew she was going to miss her, whenever she left the ship. Miss her more than anything else, even the frequent couplings with her fellow Velorians for whom sex seemed to be the only antidote for utter boredom. She would miss them, too – and, unlike Jusalem she would never see them again.

For all that, Kalla didn't feel sad about taking her leave of the *Bountiful Voyager*, she was excited – excited about all she had learned aboard ship, but also at the thought of seeing another world for the first time. But would that world live up to her imaginings? The bare facts she had been told meant little; it was how they would affect her life that mattered.

When the *Bountiful Voyager* landed, word soon came that Basil had died two years earlier. Feodor was now Patriarch. He was also married. It was another dynastic thing, this time with the Gregoras clan. Basil had known nothing of Velor or its women; the *Bountiful Voyager's* latest trade offering was going to be a complete surprise to Feodor – Jusalem would have to brief him about all that, and help entice him to sample the wares.

# Part Two: Indentured

## 1. Striking a Bargain

Kalla was led into an ornate tent by Jemuna, a member of the ship's trade crew who had prepared her to be viewed by the Patriarch. Jusalem, who was already there, addressed him in Romaic, which Kalla could not understand, although she had been taught a few phrases by rote for this occasion.

She was outfitted in a gown of green and red which she had been told was the proper formal attire for Romaic women. The gown was tight across her breasts and left her ankles and lower calves bare, although she had been told that it should rightly reach almost to the floor. They could not find shoes to fit her, so she was barefoot.

There was one addition to the Romaic outfit – the slave collar.

The tent was furnished with table and chairs and there were colorful cushions on the floor. In addition Jusalem and Jemuna, there was Haran, whose large earlobes marked him as a male. It was the custom, Jusalem said, for a party of three to take part in negotiations such as this.

The door at the other end of the tent opened and three men walked in. They all had dark hair not only on their heads and chins but on their upper lips. They wore richly colored robes, which reached to just below their knees. Their brown boots were high and tight and covered the lower part of their legs.

The one in front exuded an air of authority. He was taller than the others, though half a head shorter than Kalla. His features, those not hidden by the beard, were strong. His eyes were a dark, penetrating brown. She could not say if he was handsome, just

that he was so very different from all the men she had ever known. She wondered about the beard, what it would feel like to touch it, what it would feel like to have it touch her body.

“Feodor,” Jemuna whispered to her.

She saw the Romaioi looking her over, their gazes scanning her body, stopping for a long look where the gown tightly outlined her breasts.

Feodor spoke to the Scalantrans.

“He desires to hear your voice,” Jemuna informed Kalla. “Greet him as you were instructed.”

Kalla bowed as she had been taught. Then she said: “Greetings, Sebastos. It will be my pleasure to serve you.”

Feodor spoke again.

“What did he say?” Kalla asked.

“He said that you are as beautiful as he was told,” Jemuna said. “And that your voice is lovely for one so tall. But the price is steep and he has known many beautiful women.”

“Tell him that I am highly skilled in exotic sexual techniques.”

It was Jusalem who conveyed the message.

Feodor responded and Jemuna again translated for Kalla: “He says that there are many *hetaerae* – we do not know how to translate that – who are highly renowned for their sexual skills.”

“Tell him that only when he sees me naked will he know my true beauty and feel the essence of my power.”

Again it was Jusalem spoke to Feodor, who responded curtly.

“He said you should remove all of your clothes,” Jemuna said.

Kalla turned away from the Romaioi and slowly removed her gown. She took a deep breath and thought of how long she had been without a man. She thought about the last time she had been with the High Priest. He had taken his pleasure with her over and over again in a long night of sexual revelry before sending her away. Now she let her sexual juices flow and released her pheromones.

Kalla turned around and displayed herself to him, her hands on her hips and her legs slightly parted. She heard him gasp. She saw the other Romaioi looking at her as if they had never seen a naked woman. She saw Feodor begin to sweat; even through his loose robe could see his arousal. The sight triggered her pheromones, which she made no effort to suppress. The other men were soon also reacting, but tried to hide it, going as far as putting their hands in front of their crotches.

Then Feodor shouted something, and his retainers were frozen in place.

“What’s happening?” she asked Jemuna.

“He says that everyone, except you, is to leave, immediately. He will let us know when we can return. It is highly irregular, but Feodor *is* the ruler here, and therefore we must accommodate him.”

Jemuna turned to leave with Jusalem and Haran. Feodor’s retainers, walking backwards for some reason, made a clumsy exit.

As soon as Kalla was alone with him in the tent, Feodor started to speak to her. She could not understand a word he said. The words poured out quickly and his voice was hoarse. He had a wild look in his eyes. He was breathing heavily and his nostrils

flared. There was sweat on his forehead. He pointed to the cushions on the floor with a shaky hand.

Then he raised his robe and exposed his throbbing erection, surrounded by thick brown hair. Kalla silently thanked Skietra that the rumors were wrong: the hair was only around the base of his penis, not on it!

He laid his hands forcefully on her shoulders and she lay down on the cushions, spreading her legs wide for him. Then his dark bearded face was above her and he was inside her, moving with powerful strokes.

It felt so *good* to have a man inside her after so long. The games that she had played with the other girls to pass the time on the ship had afforded release, but were nothing like the feel of this powerful man, crazed with lust for her.

She wrapped her arms and legs around him. She sought as much bodily contact as possible, but his robe was bunched up between them. She tried to match his rhythm, but he didn't give her a chance. He just kept pounding away and gave her no chance to demonstrate any of her skills.

Luckily, her deprivation allowed her to come quickly and strongly. He seemed startled by her cry of joy. A moment later, he cried out loudly as he spent himself and collapsed on her.

He lay on top of her for several minutes, his breathing slowly returning to normal. Then he rose and straightened his robes. He walked to the tent flap through which his retainers had left and called them back, then did the same with the Scalantrans. Kalla took the opportunity to retrieve her gown and put it back on.

All the others being reassembled with some semblance of dignity, Feodor walked over to the table. He looked at the indenture document there, and quickly signed it.

The Scalantrans held their hands over their heads, opposable digits of one hand pressed to the corresponding digit on the other hand.

“We have acknowledged that the arrangement is made,” Jemuna said. “Feodor has purchased your contract. You are now indentured to him and to his heirs for one hundred years. We shall now return you to the ship so that you can learn the Romaic language and customs.”

*Practically the rest of my life*, Kalla thought. But then Jemuna reminded her of the other ritual phrase that she had memorized and been advised to utter on this occasion.

“It shall please me to spend my years on Romaia,” she said.

Feodor suddenly looked annoyed. “Andros,” he said.

Jusalem and other others were taken aback, and the Patriarch spoke to the trade captain for a moment.

“It seems that he has used the occasion of his recent wedding to change the name of the planet,” Jemuna informed Kalla a moment later. “We must smooth this over. Please wait for us outside.

Whatever they did didn’t take long. The Scalantran delegation emerged a few minutes later, and Haran seemed especially pleased.

“The Patriarch has found you exceedingly worthy, and was exceedingly eager to agree to our price,” he said. “He thinks it exceedingly strange that you must wear gold in order for him to have sex with you. Naturally, he told me, he can find a gold necklace

that will serve the purpose better. He finds the collar exceedingly ugly and exceedingly demeaning.”

## 2. Getting in Deep

“Now your education must begin,” Jemuna said to Kalla when they had returned to the ship. “Feodor has contracted for a Companion in every sense of the word, not just a body that he might soon tire of. The first step, of course, will be for you to learn the Romaic language. You will start on your next main shift.”

Kalla returned to her quarters. The girls crowded around her, eager to know what had happened. She answered their questions the best she could. But really, her time with Feodor and his men had been so short. So she told them about Feodor’s reaction to her and told them how she was able to turn her pheromones on. “Learn to do that under your own control,” she told them. “Do it at the right moment and there’s no doubt about the outcome.”

“Why do we have to wait to turn on the pheromones?” Rilanna asked. “Why shouldn’t we have our pheromones going full strength when we first walk in?”

Kalla looked at her. “What if he’s someone repulsive?”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that.”

Kalla shook her head. She worried about some of the girls. Would they know how to act on a strange planet? She wished she could be around longer, to help them as they went to their new homes.



The girls kept at it, asking question after question. And what Kalla really wanted to do was to be alone, to think about what had happened, to think about the man she would live with until he died.

And there really wasn't that much to think about. She liked his face – the little that she could see of it, so much had been hidden by hair. But what she could see looked like a strong face. And his dark eyes, so different from the blue of Velorian eyes, were intriguing. She liked the directness of his gaze.

And she liked the sound of his voice. It was deep, much deeper than a Velorian male's. His voice carried, but he didn't shout. No need for a man of his standing to do that. He spoke quietly but forcefully. A voice to command men. But did it ever soften when talking to women? Would it soften for her?

Of his body, she had seen almost nothing. His robes covered him to his calves and his boots were high, up to his knees. He had exposed himself briefly before entering her – just long enough to see the dark curly hair at its base and to allay the girls' concerns over hairy penises. He was not quite as large as some Velorian men who prided themselves on their size, but he was quite adequate and had felt good inside her, filling her and satisfying her with his body's power. And when she embraced him she had felt the muscles of his back through his robes. She was looking forward to seeing him naked.

But what he was like as a man, what it would be like to be his Companion, she had no idea. Would he want to talk to her, spend time with her, or just use her for sex? She sighed, only time would tell.

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Her education began right after breakfast. Danyom and Lesora, two Scalantrans she had not previously met, took her into a small room and told her to sit on the only chair in the room. The chair turned out to be very soft and comfortable. The light level in the room was very low. Lesora attached some sensors to Kalla's forehead and to the pulse point on her wrist.

"Just sit here and relax," Danyom said. "Look straight ahead. After we leave, you will see some colored lights. Just look at them without trying too hard to follow them. Soon you will be in a trance-like state. When the sensors indicate that you are in the correct mental state, we will start the session."

"What should I do?" Kalla asked.

"Do not try to do anything," Danyom said. "Just take it all in without trying to think about it. There will be audio and some visual. We start with the basic language. People greeting each other, pointing to objects and naming them. Simple things to start with. Do not worry. We will return when the session is over and it will be time for your lunch."

And with that, the two Scalantrans left the room. Kalla did as she was told. The colored lights seemed to dance around in the air without any discernible pattern. It seemed ridiculous to her. But it must have worked, because the next thing that she was fully conscious of was Danyom and Lesora coming back into the room, and she had words floating around in her head that had never been there before.

Lesora removed the sensors and said: "You did fine. We have some lunch for you in the next room."

"Aren't I going to eat with the other girls?" Kalla asked.

"No," Danyom said. "We do not want them distracting you."

Danyom and Lesora sat with her while she quickly ate her lunch. They asked her questions about how she felt during the session, but nothing about the content of the session. And, of course, they didn't eat with her. The Scalantrans and Velorians had never eaten together. Kalla supposed that their food would be too different, or perhaps the Scalantrans had some prejudice against eating with aliens.

When she was finished, Danyom said: "Now Jemuna will take over. Your session with her will be in this room." And then they left.

Kalla sat there, fidgeting, waiting for something to happen. Finally, Jemuna came in and said: "Hello, Kalla." But she didn't say it in Scalantran or Velorian. She said it in Romaic, and Kalla understood her. *It worked!* she thought. Carefully, Kalla answered her.

Jemuna put a recording device on the table and played it so that Kalla could hear how she sounded. Kalla realized that her pronunciation was not exactly right. She tried again, and Jemuna said: "Good." Kalla was glad that that was one of the words learned in the first deepteach session.

For the rest of the shift, Jemuna spoke to Kalla only in Romaic, getting her to use the words she had learned. Kalla had to really concentrate. The words were there, but she had to learn to pull them from her memory and pronounce them correctly. She dreaded hearing the words: "No, try again." At the end of the session, things were going more smoothly, but she was still glad to hear Jemuna tell her that it was time for dinner.

Kalla enjoyed her dinner with the other Velorian girls. It was a relief to speak her own language, to talk without thinking. She told the girls what the deepteach session

was like. She felt that giving them the information, telling them what it was like, was the least she could do to help them prepare for their own future sessions.

And she told them about the hard work after the deepteach. She saw the looks on some of their faces and worried that those girls wouldn't be willing or able to put in the hard work necessary to learn the language of their adopted planet.

And so it continued. Each day learning more vocabulary, more intricacies of the language. And with the language, the customs of Andros itself. The best session was one in which she learned to read and write Romaic. Jemuna brought her a beautifully illustrated book. She opened it and began reading about the history of the planet – as seen by the Andros family, at least. Now she knew that she could keep herself busy if only she had access to more books.

After the next session, which covered some physical and political geography – including what little was known of the rival Gregoras realm – Jemuna told her: “You are ready now. We have taught you all that we can. After your sleep-shift you will have your breakfast here and then you will be turned over to Feodor. One more thing, you may take these books with you, so that you may continue studying.”

“Thank you Jemuna. You have been a great help to me.”

“It was a pleasure working with someone who caught on so quickly. But we do not have to say goodbye now, I will escort you off the ship.”

Kalla knew that she couldn't wander around the ship and seek out Scalantrans to talk to. She wanted to say goodbye to the Travel Captain and the Trade Captain, but knew that it would have to be their decision to see her. The one place she could go to

was the library. When she got there she was happy to see the Scalantran she most wanted to see – Sulva.

Sulva came to her and embraced her Scalantran fashion, her hands on Kalla's shoulders, and Kalla returned her embrace. "I will miss you Kalla."

"And I you, Sulva." Kalla hesitated before speaking again. "Please don't take this wrong, but I never imagined I could feel so deeply about someone so different from my own people."

"I understand, Kalla. And I feel the same way. And I think that this is a good indication that you will be able to adapt to your new home."

Kalla enjoyed her dinner with the other Velorian girls and the rest of her time with them was pleasant. But she realized that she was growing tired of their company. They seemed childish to her. Was it because they had ridiculed her for all her hard work learning Scalantran and all that the aliens could teach her? Perhaps it was because her mind was now on Andros, and her future instead of Velor and her past.

Still, she allowed them to throw an orgy with herself as the guest of honor – to say no would have been mean spirited and insulting. And there was no denying that she enjoyed the pleasure that they all freely gave her.

She slept soundly and awoke with great anticipation of her new life. When she awoke, the others saw her off with ribald remarks.

"I hope we can all find penises before we go crazy," said Rilanna.

"It's not fair," Jaleel wailed. "You'll be filled up every night while we're empty."

"If the men on other worlds are anything like Feodor, you'll have nothing to worry about," Kalla assured them before accepting hugs from all and taking her leave.

It was a sad moment, a farewell she knew would be final – not just to her fellow travelers, but to any of her own people.

At the exit from the ship, Jusalem and Jemuna and Sulva met her to make their farewells.

“I know I’ll never see the other girls again,” Kalla said. “But I *will* see you, won’t I?”

“Not for a generation,” Jusalem said. “We are traveling a long circuit. I suppose we will see a lot of changes by then. Indeed, I’m almost sure of it.”

“We’ll remember you to Velor, when next we call there,” said Jemuna.

“You’re the best student I’ve ever had,” added Sulva. “I’m expecting great things of you.”

*Great things?* What did she know of great things?

### **3. Matters of State, Matters of Love**

Kalla gave a sigh of relief when the Patriarch’s chamberlain Melitas came to her one night a local week later to escort her to Feodor’s chamber. She had wondered why he had not called the night before.

When she arrived in his chamber this time, he was sitting at his writing table. He dismissed Melitas, looked up and said: “Excellent timing. I have just finished reading this report. I can’t concentrate on any work when you’re here.”

She was wearing a Romaic stola over her tunica, the undergarment common to both sexes here. The stola, of silk dyed purple and gold in an elaborate pattern, had long sleeves that reached to her wrists, and the rest of the garment reached to the floor.

It seemed strange to her how much the stola resembled the dalmatica, which was the standard dress for men, even though she knew that women's status here was no more equal to that of men than on Velor. The sleeves of Feodor's dalmatica were cut more narrowly, and unlike her stola it was heavily bejeweled. It also had what Feodor called buttons down the front.

She hadn't even begun to remove her stola, but she could hear the excitement of his ragged breathing. She smiled at him, and let him take the lead in removing his boots and outer garments. As he unbuttoned the dalmatica and let it fall to the floor, as he slipped out of his tunica, she had a chance to enjoy the sight of his muscular body. It hadn't taken her long to realize that she liked the curly dark hair on his chest that thickened on his abdomen until it was dense and luxuriant at his crotch. He was ready for action, she saw, and he could hardly control himself as she slowly undressed and flaunted her body. She lay down on her bed, spreading her legs invitingly, proffering her gravity-defying breasts.

Just as in the tent and her first nights here, he took her with no preliminaries, but she knew what to expect by now and had no trouble matching his rhythm. It lasted longer than the first few times, but was still over too quickly. But she didn't mind, because she knew that this was just the beginning.

After he rested for a while, she began caressing him with her fingers and lips and tongue. And he responded, doing the same to her, feeling all the contours of her body. She moved his head to her breast and he sucked each nipple as he caressed the other breast. Then she turned him on his back and licked his shaft and sucked him gently.

When his groans intensified she straddled him and looked him in the eye. “Now, Sebastos?” she said teasingly.

“Now, Kalla, now,” he shouted.

She impaled herself on him and started to move slowly. The first time she did this for him, he didn’t let her take charge. But she had convinced him to let her show him her skills and he now let her do the work. She slowly increased the speed and intensity of her movements, drawing it out, watching the pleasure on his face, until she saw that he could stand it no longer and brought them both to a shattering climax.

“That was wonderful Kalla, and such a contrast to last night,” Feodor said with a sigh.

“Last night? What happened last night?”

“Helena sent me a message yesterday. She said that I had played with my new toy long enough and it was time to perform my husbandly duties.”

“I can understand that she wanted you.”

Feodor snorted. “It’s not me that she wants. It’s an heir that she wants. She just needs me to get one.”

“How do you know she doesn’t want you?”

“She was her usual cold self. I never thought I’d say this about any woman, but it’s almost becoming a chore to bed her.”

“Is having an heir so important to you?”

“It’s the one, sole and only reason for our marriage. An heir would bind our two families together, ensure that the planet remains united.”

“Her family is as important as yours?”



“Before we were married, the island of the Gregoras clan was a realm unto itself, and had designs on mine.”

“And now her family has given up its claims?”

“Not quite. They have no male heir and although there have been female rulers in the past, Helena’s father, Festus, does not believe that she would be strong enough to hold the Gregoras realm. But they feel that if we produced an heir they could gain power through their influence on him.”

“And you, what do you gain?”

“I gain an end to wasting my resources and people on wars with the Gregoras. I gain a chance to help my people prosper. But if we do not produce an heir soon, they may become impatient and might even withdraw from the alliance. And the bloodshed might start all over again.”

He paused for a moment.

“We’ll know what fate holds in store for us by sometime this autumn. A son and heir... or madness.”

Kalla saw the look of sadness on Feodor’s face and shook her head at the follies of humans. She had known nothing of war and bloodshed except what she had learned from references in Scalantrans’ histories of the Seeded worlds to the Terran peoples from which they were seeded.

“Enough of this for now. Come Kalla. Show me some more of your arts of love.”

Kalla laughed. “I shall be happy to do so, Sebastos.” And she went about her pleasurable work.

## 4. Period of Adjustment



Kalla's new world took getting used to, as Feodor took getting used to her.

On the journey to the Keep from the trading ground, she had seen any number of strange things: animals that actually walked on legs, instead of slithering along. Plants that stood up in the air – their edible parts were called “grains.” There were larger plants called “trees” that stood a number of man-heights, with “branches” that spread out in all

directions without breaking and falling – the closest life forms to them on Velor were the domewoods that grew in low spots where the water wasn't too far underground.

On the landward site of the Keep, to the west of the Gate, was the Patriarchal Garden, a place of winding paths, trees and shrubs and vines and other plant life in seemingly endless variety, and beds of flowers in a profusion of colors and fragrances. Feodor would take her walking there by day, when time permitted. He would patiently explain which flora came from Earth and which were native to the planet, which were purely ornamental and which were also sources of medicines and dyes and other things of practical use.

On the seaward side was the sea – not a shallow swamp, filled with vegetation, edible and otherwise, but a vast extent of water that vanished into the distance. There were “fish” there, and they fed on other fish or on plants, but you didn't see them all the time. What you saw was the wind rippling the water, and the “tides” caused by the gravity of Alkmene, innermost and largest of the triple moons, and the waves that broke against the shore from the effects of the tides and winds.

Seeing so far into the distance was itself a novelty for her on this world, where the sun shone bright without a curtain of dust in the air. And when it rained, what came down was actually rain – not like the mudstorms she had occasionally experienced on Velor, after which her sun would appear orange for a short time before the dust clouds returned and it went back to red. Here the sun was bright yellow, and turned red only at sunset and sunrise.

She had read all the books Jemuna had left her, but she was still full of questions every night with Feodor. She found it hard to understand the customs and beliefs of her

new world, especially when it came to mating and something called the Church. People here, at least some of them, believed in an invisible God who had once had a son on Old Earth, and the son had been put to death and become a god, or part of *the* God – it didn't make any sense to her.

“The Old Believers are more prevalent in the Gregoras realm than here,” Feodor had told her one night. “Their island was actually settled before this continent, and when they learned of the seeding here, they dispatched priests to preach to the settlers. My predecessors turned them away from Ethrata, but they did better in the outlying areas. Even so, the Church has since become more a matter of habit than conviction. Still, old habits die hard.”

One of those ingrained habits was that matings were for life, and were legitimate only if blessed by the Church. But even on Old Earth, in the Basileia ton Romaion, the keeping of mistresses had been winked at – among the highborn, at least. There had even been cases of unwanted wives being sent to what were called convents to get them out of the way.

“I shall never do that to Helena,” Feodor said. “I must honor her as my wife, and honor my commitment to Festus Gregoras. But she and he understand my needs – it is hardly a secret that Festus himself keeps company with *heterae*.”

*Heterae*, she'd learned, were trained sexual companions, a tradition dating back to Ellas, before it became part of the Empire of Roma. The institution had gone into eclipse during the later ascendancy of the Church, but been revived here.

“The *heterae*, are they trained in anything but the arts of love?” she asked.

“They are educated in the Suda, a compendium of ancient knowledge about the history and culture of Ellas in both pagan and Christian times.” he explained. “Thus they can carry on learned discourses with their lovers. I’ll loan you a copy.”

But when Kalla read the Suda, she found it a disappointment. There were only scattered quotations from and commentaries on writers like Homer and Sophocles and Josephus, and dry chronicles of the history of the Romaic Empire and of a people called the Hebrews to whom the son of the invisible God had appeared.

“Is this all there is?” she asked Feodor a few nights later.

“It is one of the few books besides the Bible that the Seeders allowed us to bring with us,” he said. “But I don’t think you’d be interested in the Bible. Anyway, you tell more interesting stories, about Velor and the Scalantrans and the Galen.”

“I’ve told you that I don’t really know anything about the Galen, except what the Priests told me,” she said. “And from what I’ve learned since leaving Velor, I don’t think I can believe them.”

Feodor had been full of questions during their first nights together, first about the business of the gold collar. “I don’t know anything about it,” she’d confessed. “I didn’t even know there was such a thing as the gold field until we left it.”

That hadn’t impressed Feodor. But when she removed the collar and floated in the air before him, that *had* impressed him. He even made a suggestive overture.

Kalla shook her head. “It wouldn’t work,” she said. “You couldn’t... enter me. And I might harm you.”

She told him about the incident on the ship, about what she’d learned there.

Feodor was abashed, but not intimidated, knowing how much she welcomed his attentions while under gold. And he was curious about the rest of it, naturally.

“Can anything harm *you*?” he asked, knowing that even his most ardent thrusts and embraces had never caused her pain or injury.

“Not that I know of.”

“It were best not to speak of this to others,” Feodor said. “It might become useful at some time, but only at the right time, as a surprise. And this business of flying – you should practice it in private. That too might become useful in emergencies. But again, only at the right time.”

So she practiced... very discreetly.

On that later night when they were discussing the Suda, Kalla surprised him with another suggestion. “There might be copies of those ancient plays and epics available on Olympia.”

“Now why hadn’t I thought of that?” he confessed. “I was just looking for technical books, and the Scalantrans told me the texts they brought me on their visit before last were for children. Jusalem found that amusing. At least, that’s what father told me she said.”

“You’re hardly a child,” Kalla remarked.

They spent the rest of that night in pleasurable adult pursuits.

Gazing from the northern parapet a few days later, past the squat buildings of wood and stone that made up Ethrata to the distant fields beyond, she could see the road that ran through fields of grain that vanished into the distance. The trading ground that was reserved for the Scalantrans during their visits was beyond the horizon, but

she could see the tips of mountains that must be incredibly tall, even for a world like this.

There was a steady traffic along the road – farmers coming to town, townsmen on the way to other towns on whatever business called them. Most rode something called horses, which came from Earth. But there were also the greatoxen, native to the planet, which stood a man and a half high, and hauled the high-wheelers loaded with food and other goods from the countryside.

As she watched the parade of life, she sensed before she saw that Feodor had come up beside her, and turned to greet him.

“Good day, Sebastos,” she said, mindful of the need for formality in public.

“You seem to be entranced by my world,” he observed; then added in a whisper, “As much as I am entranced by you.”

Kalla felt a warm flush, and a rush – she too was entranced, remembering the past night, and the other nights like it, and looking forward to more.

“Would you like to see more of Andros?” he asked.

She wondered briefly what Helena thought about him renaming the world for his family. She had avoided any contact with his wife, but couldn't help seeing her now and then by accident, in company with other members of the official household. Helena always acted as if Kalla were invisible. It was probably just as well. But perhaps she had talked to Feodor about it, now that she was pregnant.

“Would my absence from the Keep be helpful at this time?” Kalla responded. She thought it best, here, to put things delicately. But for the trading ground and the road to the Keep, she had not yet seen anything beyond Ethrata – a city by local standards but

hardly a town compared to Ves'tathy back on Velor.

"Surely you jest," Feodor said. "But it would be helpful for you to accompany me on my tour of the provinces. I've put that off for too long. In the usual course of things, Helena would join me, but for the present she has... other responsibilities. And it isn't as if she desires my company in any case, now that her primary mission is accomplished. My mission as well, taking the long view – but that's beside the point."

"Will we be seeing the rest of your own family?"

Feodor had told her that his younger brother Rulav and teenage sister Gerta had been staying with their mother Nadezhda this summer in the Northern Reach, learning the shinefur trade. They needed something productive to do with their lives rather than just "decorating the Keep like icons," as he'd put it.

"Indeed," he said now. "We'll have a lot to talk about. But you'd meet them in any case when they return home. There's another reason for bringing you. The thing is, you can give me something that even Helena couldn't on this journey."

"And what might that be. Besides..."

"A fresh pair of eyes."

## **6. Eyes – Blue and Green**

Her eyes were upon all she saw during that journey, but thousands of other eyes were upon *her*.

"I should have expected this," Feodor confessed. "People here have never seen a human from another world. Few have seen the Scalantrans. I don't know what they'd make of *them*, but they make a great deal of *you*."



It was true. Her blond hair and blue eyes attracted attention wherever she went, no matter that she dressed modestly, wearing a cap and veil over her head as well as concealing her body in a linen stola. Her tresses were naturally long – which happened to be the Romaic style. And people knew who and what she was, even if few were so impolite as to talk about it.

They had set out in a closed carriage adorned with the Andros family emblem – what Feodor called an eagle. That was a bird that had been a symbol of the Romaic Empire back on Earth. There weren't any eagles on Andros, although there were birds of prey from other Seeded worlds that looked somewhat like them; the only birds the Seeders had brought straight from Earth were poulia: domestic chickens and ducks.

The carriage, drawn by four horses, was preceded by an escort of soldiers who sounded trumpets and beat drums whenever they approached a stopping place – or to alert other traffic, like merchants transporting goods to market in highwheelers, to make way. Behind the carriage, which necessarily took a leisurely pace to match that of the escort, followed Melitas and his scribes and a detachment of mounted troops – not that there was expected to be any need for the latter.

“It's a matter of tradition,” Feodor said. “An impression of authority.”

Looking out through the window of the carriage, Kalla saw for the first time what she knew must be an olive grove. There were people on ladders with buckets, picking the ripe olives – they looked towards the procession and waved, then went back to their work.

“Some of my ancestors would make them get down from the trees and come to the road and bow in submission,” Feodor told Kalla. “My father put an end to that, and to

much else. Some traditions are useless, and even harmful in the long run.”

The first town they reached to stop for the night was Skolios, a smaller version of Ethrata, a place of cotton and linen fabricators, olive presses, blacksmith shops, stables and other necessary businesses. There was a water-driven mill at the edge of town, at which a wagonload of grain was being unloaded at the time of their arrival.

“Sebastos,” said the miller, saluting Feodor smartly. “Your accommodations at the inn are ready, and we are ready to serve you.”

Babylas Doukas was also strategos – military and civil commander of the theme – and the mill had come to him as an equivalent to the land grants given to soldier-farmers in the region he commanded. The inn he showed them to was modest but clean.

“I will have some of my men see to your needs,” he said.

“Let them see to the needs of my own men, and those of the horses,” Feodor responded.

“It shall be done, Sebastos,” said Doukas, with a broad smile. Eyeing Kalla for a moment, he added, “You will find the bed upstairs to be large and comfortable.”

They made good use of the bed, but not before making their way around town to greet the people and listen to what they had to say. Complaints were few, except for a recent hailstorm, which, they well knew, even the Patriarch couldn’t do anything about – but which had hit a few outlying farms especially hard. Feodor advised Doukas that he should call upon the owners of other farms to help them out, as they would wish to be helped in the same circumstances.

The driver of a highwheeler that was stopping in town on the way to Ethrata was

concerned about the state of a bridge further up the Great Northern Road in the next theme; it had creaked ominously when he drove over it.

Feodor promised to speak with the strategos there, authorizing him to detail some of his men and requisition whatever lumber was necessary to make repairs and charge it to the Patriarchy. Melitas, without even being asked, had the scribes put it in writing. All very formal and precise; the chamberlain knew the proper wording, and the scribes followed his dictation to the letter, producing one copy for the strategos, one for the archives and one for Feodor to present to the driver.

“I know you to be a man of your word, Sebastos,” the driver said, accepting the elegantly written directive. “I shall remind other drivers of that, and likewise the traders we serve.”

Farmers and farmer’s wives from the surrounding theme, having heard of their lord’s visit, began to arrive – some bearing pots of their home-prepared dishes. These were sampled by Feodor and Kalla, who found nearly all to their liking. But there was far too much for the two of them, so they invited the soldiers to share. There wasn’t enough to go *that* far around, but the local fare was a welcome supplement to the rations they carried.

Yet Kalla observed that, while the most of the men in the village smiled at her, the women looked nervous. And there were a few men who also looked nervous – one was a priest at the local church. “This is unseemly,” she heard him say, in a low voice that he must have assumed she couldn’t overhear.

“What we are doing is considered a sin by the Church,” Feodor explained to her that night. “It was the same on Earth, or so I have been told, only more so. The Church

was powerful there, almost as powerful as the state. And yet the emperors commanded the Church, even as they commanded the State, and though they were married with the sanction of the Church in order to get heirs, they kept what were called 'mistresses' for their pleasure, and the Church looked the other way."

"Am I your 'mistress,' then?"

"Far more than that! I've learned a great deal from you."

And indeed he had. Among other things, he had learned the pleasure of foreplay, of gentle caresses, running his hands up and down her incredible body, kissing her on the mouth softly and then tonguing her deeply, sucking and then biting her breasts, then working his way down her belly and between her legs to tease her clit and drink his fill of her fragrant juices. When he finally entered her, he teased her with his cock – stroking her fast, then slow, fast and slow again in a ragged rhythm against the myriad pleasure points within her. She teased him with her inner muscles, could sense the moment that he was about to come.

"I love you!" he shouted as he came, loudly enough to be heard throughout the inn, and she came herself with a shout that might have awakened the entire village.

"Would that you could be my Theodora," he sighed, after a repeat performance, with her riding him to a climax as he lay back and gazed at her in rapture.

"Theodora?"

"Empress under Justinian on Earth, many hundreds of years ago. She had been a woman of pleasure, but she proved to be of great counsel to him as his wife. Only, I could never marry you. The Church would never sanction it, and it would not serve the interests of the State. We could never have children."

\* \* \*

Melitas intercepted them on the way down to breakfast the following morning.

“Sebastos,” he whispered. “I would be remiss in my duty if I failed to inform you that your... enthusiasm... last night has not been well-received by certain elements in the village. Especially as this morning is Christday, which I fear may have escaped your attention – may I be forgiven if I am mistaken.”

At that very moment, the village church bell began to sound. Christday, set by the local calendar, was to Andros what Sunday had been on Earth – and had been since the Seeders had brought the first settlers here. The Seeders had told them that the days here were shorter than those on Earth, so the Church had decided to add an extra day to even things out.

As the Patriarchal party formed up to leave Skolios, the villagers heading for the local church appeared... unhappy. Feodor quietly advised his men to put off their departure until everyone was inside who wanted to be. And there was to be no sounding of trumpets by the vanguard.

“I’m afraid I presumed too much,” Feodor confessed in the privacy of the carriage after they were well on their way. “We were doing nothing that hasn’t been done before by patriarchs and other high-born people with their ladies. But there are those who do not wish it rubbed in their noses or sounded in their ears. We must be more discreet.”

“Go off in the woods, perhaps?”

“A bit rough for me. Though not, I suppose, for you.”

## 5. Boomers and Spitters

Four nights later, at a town called Segilla, Feodor was studying one of the books he had brought along. Thanks to her deep-teach in Romaic, Kalla was able to make out the words, but because they were in a different dialect of Greek than Romaic, she had trouble making out their meaning. So Feodor explained one of the texts to her.

“This book is about something called boomers – devices made with a substance that burns instantly and makes a very loud noise, like thunder, and are used to break things apart. It took me years to work out how they are made. I have Hypatius of Nesalonika working on them. He’s not just catapan there, but a man with an inventive mind. Brimstone, one of the right ingredients, is abundant there. The others, manure and charcoal, can be found anywhere.

“But what would you do with these ‘boomers?’”

“Destroy enemy forces, of course. That was my original intent. To carry the war against the Gregoras clan to their own realm. But they are no longer the enemy; I have no more enemies. But of late I have been thinking of other applications. They could be used in excavating channels – bringing water to otherwise arid regions. Or shortening roads by cutting artificial passes through ridges. Such things have been done on other worlds for many years. We could expand agriculture and facilitate trade. Only...”

“Only what?”

“The same book mentions weapons called spitters, metal tubes through which pellets of metal can be expelled at high speed. It says they can be aimed more precisely than arrows or spears – and carry farther. I’m not sure that would be a good thing.”

“But they might useful for hunting,” Kalla suggested.

“No better than spears and arrows.”

“But... couldn't people shoot birds on the wing? And wouldn't it be safer hunting Brightbears?”

The bears were the source of shinefur. They were huge, although not as huge as greatoxen. It took a lot of arrows to kill them, but those arrows had to be targeted well so as not to damage the pelts. A few daring hunters would approach them with spears – and sometimes paid with their own lives. Only the wealth that came of the shinefur trade kept them at it.

“Hmm,” said Feodor. “I shall have to bring that up with Mother.”

“Should we sneak off somewhere?” Kalla asked, changing the subject.

“And lose our way in the dark?”

“I can see in the dark, remember?”

“Maybe we should just stay in our room and be... quieter.”

“Where's your sense of curiosity, or adventure, or delight?”

“Well, maybe just a walk...”

It was a bright night out, with Konta in full phase. There were still a few people in the streets at this hour, enjoying the moonlight and the summer air. Kalla strolled with Feodor past the edge of town, where a forest of ironwood – good for construction, she remembered – began to line the Great Northern Road.

“Should we?” Feodor asked.

“Should we what?” Kalla teased.

“Find a pleasant bower.”

“Bower?”

That was supposed to mean a lady's bedroom, or a trysting place in a private garden like the one back at the keep.

"Nature sometimes designs such," Feodor said. "Perhaps we'll be in luck."

She could see that he had a lustful eye – among other things.

But their luck proved to be otherwise. They had gone only a short distance into the wood when they heard a woman's screams.

For a moment, Kalla thought some other couple had the same idea as theirs. But the screams didn't sound right, and were suddenly cut off. Feodor must have come to the same conclusion, for he began to run towards the scene – heedless of any danger, for he was unarmed and, for this occasion, had left his men behind.

Kalla followed, and within moments had come across the scene: a woman lying unconscious on the ground, blindfolded; over her, a man obviously intent on having her by force – and angered by the sudden interruption. He turned their way, glaring at them.

"Get off of her!" Feodor shouted, his own rage aroused by the sight. "Stand and name yourself."

"What affair is this of yours?"

"It is your Patriarch who commands you, wretch!"

The man rose now, and took a closer look. When he recognized Feodor, he was startled, but only for a moment. Feodor, too, was startled, for he saw that the man wore a crucifix around his neck, and that his half-on, half-off vestments were a priest's.

The priest, no doubt realizing that he had been found out, remained defiant.

"A pretender, more like, who disrespects the Church and consorts with a whore from another world. A pretender, I see, who comes here unarmed to dally with her. A



pretender whose life will end here.”

With that, the priest reached down for a club – the same one he must have used on the woman, Kalla realized – and came at Feodor. Kalla intervened, and the weapon struck her chest harmlessly as he swung with all his might. The priest made to swing again, but she grabbed the club out of his hand and knocked him to the ground.

For once the man was speechless, looking at her, and Feodor, and back to her.

“You shall face justice, here and now,” Feodor said. And to Kalla, “Let me have the club.”

“But Feodor, surely he must be held to account before a court.”

“Priests are subject only to Church tribunals, an institution I can see now that I should have ended, and that I *shall* end as soon as we return home. Moreover, he has seen *you* as others have *not* seen you. He cannot be allowed to live.”

“Mercy, Sebastos,” the priest whimpered now. “Mercy.”

“*Feodor!*” cried Kalla, realizing that the Patriarch was *serious*.

“Your indenture requires...” he began. Then his face reddened in shame.

“I’ll make it quick,” he said. “But it *must* be done.”

Feodor took the club from Kalla. The priest stood there, his whimpering no longer framing itself into words, Feodor swung the club hard, breaking the man’s skull. He fell on the ground, no longer whimpering, no longer moving. Like a zark, only...

With an incredible sense of calm, he then dropped the club and turned to Kalla.

“We must take this woman back to town, to a healer,” he said. “After that, I want you to return here and bury the priest. Bury him very deeply. I think you are capable of that.”

*Does he even **care** that I have seen a man **killed** for the first time?* she thought.  
*Is this the kind of man he really is? And what kind of woman am I, to be his lover?*

But she couldn't voice those thoughts.

"Yes, I am capable of that," was all she could say.

"Let the priest's fate remain a mystery. That is for the best, even for the woman."

The woman recovered. She had never seen her attacker.

Kalla did as she was bid with the body, trying not to think about it afterwards.

*For the best.* Feodor's words still echoed in her mind as they left the following morning. For several nights, she wasn't up to making love with Feodor. He looked at her as if he understood, making no demands, never mentioning her indenture. It was Kalla herself who, after those several nights, couldn't stand it any more and returned to his bed.

*My Velorian nature,* she realized.

Nesalonika was a bustling town of 50,000, actually larger than Ethrata. It was the commercial center of Strymon, which had been an independent realm in days of old but had joined the Patriarchate of its own accord to take advantage of its strategic position on the most direct route to the Northern Reach – decades before Basil's marriage had brought the Reach itself into the Andros fold.

The town was a center of commerce for the catapanate as well as a rest stop for overland trade: the home of smiths and wagonmakers, bakers and builders, stables for greatoxen as well as horses. There were taverns and fine inns for travelers.

But Feodor and Kalla were welcomed at the villa of Hypatius Lagudes, catapan of Strymon, whose family had ruled Strymon from its founding.



## 6. Rocks That Go Boom

“It doesn’t look like much, does it?” Hypatius said.

Just a dirty black rock was what it looked like.

“But look what happens when I toss it into the fire.”

The catapan proceeded to do so, from a distance of five strides.

The dirty rock took an arc into the blaze, and there was a resounding *bam*.

“I had to practice throwing ordinary stones at first, to get a feel for the aim and distance,” Hypatius explained. “At my age, that’s about the best I can do.”

“Is that all?” It was Nadezhda, Feodor’s mother. She was a woman in her fifties, whose hair had once been red but was now going to gray, and who had blue eyes like Kalla’s.

“Not at all, Lady. I found I could create a powerful effect if the substance were enclosed in a pottery ball with an opening on one side. But is rather too dangerous for hand delivery – even though I just placed the device on the kindling and then lit the fire and withdrew to what I considered a safe distance, I was hit by a small piece of pottery. Not too badly, but it hurt like hell.”

Nadezhda, Rulav and Gerta were down from their estate in the Northern Reach, having been summoned to Nesalonika by riders. They hadn’t known what it was all about, or why they had been asked to come to a remote corner of Catapan Lugades’ estate that otherwise served only as a source of firewood.

Kalla knew that Nadezhda was of Varangian descent. Feodor had told her that these were a people who had come to the Romaic Empire from a place called Rus, after the red-haired people from further north who had conquered another people called the Slavs and founded the first cities there. They later encountered the Romaioi, first on the battlefield and then in profitable trade.

“Of what use would these boomers be?” she asked now.

“Lady, if we can perfect these devices, they could be used to widen the road to the Reach, enough to accommodate passage of greatoxen and highwheelers, reducing the time and expense of shipping shinefur to the trading ground, and thereby greatly increasing your profits.”

*One of my ideas*, Kalla thought. *But it sounds better coming from him. To the Matriarch, I am only...*

“And when are we to see something suitable to that purpose?”

*She’s quick on the uptake*, Kalla thought.

“It’s a question of finding a more efficient means of setting off the boomers. The texts Feodor copied for me speak of wicks that could be lit and burn just fast enough to ignite them within a few minutes, while still giving the workers time to get clear. Of course, the project would first require drilling of holes in the rock – a laborious and time-consuming process. It would take several years, I estimate.”

“Anything else?”

“Another idea we have is for what are called spitters, hand-carried weapons that could be used in hunting, especially for Brightbears. These devices would propel metal pellets at speeds great enough, I believe, to penetrate their skulls from a safe distance – thus reducing risks to the hunters and eliminating damage to the pelts.”

“It is a good thing that you are taking an interest in the business,” Nadezhda said. “Considering the use to which our export income has been put of late.”

There was a sudden silence in the air, broken only when Gerta said, “*Mother!*”

Hypatius quickly changed the subject to the weather – and tomorrow’s Harvest Festival. But he promised to spend as much time as he could working on the boomers and spitters.

“I think that we shall spend the fall and winter here,” Nadezhda said. “We must see this through.”

“But not a word to anyone in town about why,” the catapan cautioned. “Officially, are here for the Harvest Festival. And after that... we can think of a suitable story.”

When he was alone a little later with Feodor and Kalla, he attempted to extend his apologies on Nadezhda’s behalf.

“Let’s have none of that,” Feodor said. “I’ve made my own bed.”

Hypatius let out a nervous laugh.

“She didn’t move back to the Northern Reach *just* to see to business, did she?” asked Kalla, who had gotten Nadezhda’s drift.

“Blood is thicker than water,” Feodor said. “But the blood of commerce is thickest of all. Let’s leave it at that.”

\* \* \*

Ill feelings were forgotten the next day, as the Harvest Festival opened. Farmers and herdsmen from around the countryside and millers and bakers and tavern keepers from the town itself set up shop at a fair ground much like that used by the Scalantrans to celebrate a bountiful season.

Granaries in town were already filled with wheat and barley, and freshly baked breads were on display at the Festival. But there were also candied fruits, and nuts, honey-cakes and salads – blends of fresh vegetables in spicy syrup. “The Romaioi were the first to make them, or so our forefathers told us,” Feodor said. “Other peoples like the Florentines didn’t know what to make of them.”

Kalla hadn’t known that before; although she had eaten salads; they didn’t seem any stranger to her than other local fare. The Seeders had gone out of their way to bring the original settlers familiar domestic plants and animals: pigs, sheep, horses, cattle,

poultry, cereal grains, peas and beans. They also seeded the rivers and seas with fish and shellfish – enhanced to compete with the native marine life. The settlers themselves were left to compete with native life forms to establish, defend and expand their farms.

Romaioi had produced a number of cheeses unknown elsewhere, like *anthotiro* and *kefalintzin*, which they had re-created here. Kalla, never having known cheese on Velor, didn't have any idea what made them unique; but they certainly tasted good. It was the same with *sphoungata*, spongy dishes made from eggs. With winter coming on, farmers were already slaughtering pigs to produce sausages, salt-pork and lard; salted freshwater fish were also on display, as were *garum* sauces derived from the blood of fish.

For immediate consumption, tavern keepers were hawking lamb dishes that were roasted to perfection. Boiling had been the most common form of food preparation back on Earth, tradition had it; “the lazy cook prepares everything by boiling.” Only upper class Romaioi could afford lamb back on Earth, and the patriarchs had made it their business to encourage greater production here for food as well as wool. There was even an increase in beef, but most people still considered cattle to be draft animals rather than food animals – nobody ate horsemeat, after all. As for greatox meat, it was inedible in any case, because its biochemistry was alien to Terran life.

Kalla tried to sample as much as she could, and Feodor actually wolfed down some of the offerings, praising them effusively. It was good eating and good politics. He also expressed his admiration for the latest designs in woolens and linens by the local weavers. Good politics again.

“I told you that Harvest Festival marks the New Year, didn’t I?” Feodor asked when they retired for the night.

“I think so, Kalla said. “But is there any particular reason for that?”

“The Romaioi on Earth believed that the first day of autumn was the anniversary of the day that the world had been created. Our year is longer than Earth’s, the Seeders told us; anyway few believe that our old world was created 6,500 of its years ago. But we like to keep up tradition.”

“You’re trying to create a new world here, a better one. Aren’t you?”

“A world worthy of you, I hope.”

“Don’t tease me, Just make love to me.”

So they did, and it seemed that any troubles they faced were few and small.

## **7. Flight by Night**

Kalla lay contentedly in Feodor’s arms one night several months later, basking in the afterglow of their lovemaking. It still surprised her how much she enjoyed this, how important the feeling of closeness with Feodor had become. The priests she had known on Velor had never wanted to cuddle after sex, and had especially never wanted to talk after sex.

She suddenly thought of the priests here. They hadn’t been happy with Feodor’s decree abolishing their courts, and they couldn’t fathom why he would do such a thing. Neither, she’d heard, could Helena, and that seemed to have alienated her from the Patriarch even more than she had been already – if that were possible. Her family’s representatives at the Keep had remonstrated with Feodor, warning that Festus would



not be pleased. He had dismissed them curtly. That had seemed to be that, and things were back to normal.

Feodor was full of plans for the future. “This city is not worthy to be the capital of a worldwide realm. I want to build a new one, one that will put Ethrata to shame. And I want it to be in the heart of the continent, not here, clinging to the coast.”

“How exciting, Feodor. What will you call it?”

Feodor paused and looked at her as if he couldn't believe she would ask such a question. “Feodoropolis, of course.”

“Nobody could accuse you of modesty,” Kalla chided Feodor gently.

“A man in my position cannot afford to be modest,” he said. “He must be held in respect, and even awe...”

He paused for a moment.

“That's why *you* need to remain modest, for now. About your powers. It would not be politic should you inspire greater awe, or even reverence, than myself. I have to trust you in that, don't I? There's no way I could force you.”

“No way.”

“It will be different later, I promise, when Feodoropolis rises, takes form and puts Constantinople itself to shame. My palace will be grander than any ever seen before, and there will be temples and theaters and arenas and parks and fountains; stately homes on broad streets, storehouses and market places. What I can see now in my mind's eye will become a real thing, a living thing, and more truly than Justinian at the Hagia Sophia, I shall be able to say, ‘Solomon, I have outdone you.’”

“Not without the help of imported books,” Kalla said archly.

“True, but the vision is mine. The knowledge from books is only a means to that end, as is the training of the artisans and laborers who will bring that vision to life. I want you to share in that, as we share our love of books... among other things.”

Feodor had risen on his elbow and she saw the fire in his eyes, the passion of his vision and she wanted that passion within her. She pulled down his head and kissed him, long and hard, her tongue exploring his mouth. He broke off the kiss only to continue downward over her neck and breasts and belly until he reached the lovely lips between her legs. He sucked and nibbled her there until her moans turned to pleas. He entered her, and they moved together in a rhythm now familiar to both of them. Kalla reveled in the act which had become so much more than the pure sex, which she had always enjoyed. She heard Feodor joyously shout her name and she let herself go, feeling her love for Feodor as she came.

Kalla stroked him gently as he lay panting in her arms. After a few moments, he raised his head: “Kalla, I hate to be unromantic, but all that lovemaking has made me hungry.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Kalla answered. She went over to the wall and pulled the cord, which rang a bell in the kitchen. She gave it two pulls, which was the signal for bringing them a late night snack. It had taken the kitchen staff a while to get used to the system, but they found it much better than having a servant waiting outside the Patriarch’s chamber to relay messages to the kitchen.

Kalla put on a robe. She had laughed the first time Feodor had told her to do that. She couldn’t understand why it bothered him for a male servant to see her naked. She was still standing when there was a knock on the door.

“You may enter,” she said.

The tall man entered carrying a tray of honey-cakes and wine. Kalla was surprised to see him stumble and drop the tray. But he quickly straightened. She saw a dagger in his hand and saw him lunge towards Feodor.

“For Helena!” the man shouted. “For the true family and the true faith!”

As soon as she saw the dagger come down, Kalla threw herself between Feodor and the assassin. The dagger struck her in the chest, but failed to penetrate. The assassin continued to stab at her savagely, a look of bewilderment on his face, until finally, the blade broke.

The assassin stood there, the hilt of the dagger in his hand, saying nothing, comprehending nothing.

Feodor had already leapt from the bed and pulled a decorative ceremonial sword from the wall. As the assassin finally turned to flee, the Patriarch overtook him and ran him through.

“Feodor!” shouted Kalla, as she saw the man’s blood spew onto the carpet. She began to shake.

Feodor turned to her. “Are you all right?” he asked.

She took a deep breath. “I’ve seen you kill a man before, but...”

“I know, Kalla, I know,” he said gently. “But you must understand: you’re going to see more killing. A lot more. There’s no way to avoid it now.”

“But—”

“I might have let him live, for a while, if there were time to question him. But he had already told me all I need to know. And there *isn’t* time.”

He paused to gather some papers from a cabinet, tied them into a bundle, then grabbed his official seal from a drawer before turning back to her.

“Kalla,” he told her sternly. “Education is more than a matter of books. It is a matter of knowing what is necessary, and what is not. And right now it is necessary that we quit this place. We have no way of knowing how many of the staff, or even the guard, have been suborned. Even if they haven’t, we can be certain that Festus’ forces are on the way here.”

“Where shall we go?”

Feodor thought for a moment.

“To Nesalonika. We can rally the themata there. But I’m we’re going to need weapons – those boomers and spitters – to be certain of prevailing. Feodoropolis will have to wait. We must *fly* now, before that man’s confederates come looking for him.”

“Fly? You want me to fly you there?”

“Yes. You can do it, can’t you?”

Kalla thought for a moment. “I’ve never done it carrying anyone, but if that’s what we have to do, I’ll find a way to do it.”

“Good, Kalla. I knew I could count on you.”

“But how do I find Nesalonika from the air? I know how we got there from along the road, but it winds a lot and it doesn’t seem to make sense to retrace our steps to get there.”

“That won’t be necessary. And it should be easy. Just head east along the coast until you come to the Strymon River. It’s a really big river, remember? You can’t miss it. Then follow the river inland to the first rapids and you’ll see it on the western shore. But

land in the patch of woods just south of the town. We'll walk the rest of the way to Hypatius' estate, and tell him and the others that we started out riding but wore our horses out and came the final miles by foot."

Regretfully, Kalla removed her gold necklace and hid it as best she could. She then put on her best woolen tunic and brocaded long-sleeved stola, appropriate for the weather. And shoes, of course, although she wasn't sure they'd stay on. "I hope it won't be too long before you can find me a new necklace," she said with a forced laugh.

Feodor threw on a tunic of the same sort, plus a formal dalmatica, then put the papers and the seal in a large pouch with a sash that he tied around his neck. Then he began rummaging through his chest.

"What are you looking for?" Kalla asked.

"My shinefur coat. It's getting really cold out, and from mountain climbers, I know how much colder it gets at higher altitudes." Finally, he found it and put it on.

"It is fortunate that this took place at night," he said. "Festus' people will know that I escaped, but not *how*. It is best to keep secrets like yours as long as we can. Until I can set our ironmongers to work and turn my sketches into reality."

"Are we ready now?" Kalla asked.

"As ready as we're ever going to be."

He paused for a moment.

"I brought this upon us," he said. "I shamed Helena by taking you with me on the tour, and by taking on the Church. I will have to live with that – and learn from it."

"Then I too must live and learn from it," Kalla said.

“None of the blame attaches to you,” Feodor said. “You were still a stranger here. You had no way of understanding how she and her father would react.”

Feodor opened a window and put his arms around Kalla. Without gold, she was like a statue – but a warm statue – and her breasts made good if awkward handholds. He could lock his legs around hers as well.

She bore him up and through the window. They hung there in the air for a few seconds. Below them, within the Keep, Kalla could hear angry shouting and the sounds of metal against metal and cries of pain. Feodor must hear it too, if not as well.

“It has begun,” he said. “Those loyal to me may prevail, and have the chance to escape to the North once Festus’ forces land. Or they may die bravely, in which case I must avenge them. We shall have word before long, in either case.”

With one last look back, they began their journey.

Kalla flew carefully, still being new at this, keeping her eyes on the coast below and trying not to think about the people who must be dying back at the Keep. She dared not fly too swiftly, for Feodor’s sake, but she knew they could outpace any conceivable pursuit.

## **8. Wake-up Call**

It was still dark when they arrived at the entrance to Catapan Lagudes’ villa, but his guards were awake and alert, and quickly drew their swords, but put them down as soon as they recognized their visitors by torchlight.

“Your Patriarch is pleased by your performance,” Feodor told them. “After all, we arrived like thieves in the night.” That drew smiles from the guards, one of whom ran

inside to summon Hypatius – who was apparently an early riser, for he appeared at the door moments later, fully dressed.

“This is an unexpected pleasure, Sebastos,” he said.

“Anything but a pleasure,” Feodor told him. “Festus has moved against me. I would never have expected it before the birth of my son. That was a mistake on my part. I intend to make no others. Have you been approached?”

“Sebastos! Surely you could never doubt me. You know I would have informed you immediately.”

From the look on Hypatius’ face, Kalla surmised that he was sincerely outraged.

Feodor quickly made things clear.

“I would not be here if I did not have complete confidence in you. But you might have sent word too late to reach me, but not too late to reach Helena, and through her, Festus. It were better that they believe they might still turn you.”

“It were better that you come inside,” said Lagudes. “It must have been a trying journey here.”

“Especially after the horse stumbled and broke a leg,” Kalla broke in. “We had to put it down.”

She could see that Feodor was pleased with her improvisation, and took his cue from that.

“Riding double isn’t the best thing,” he quipped. “But, under the circumstances, it was the only thing.”

“It was that close?” Hypatius asked.

“Closer than I care to remember. Closer than I ever hope to come again. But it has been a long journey, and we are very tired.”

Kalla knew he was also very sore, from hanging onto her during the flight.

“And your Companion must be chilled to the bone,” the catapan added. “She is certainly under-dressed for the season.”

“I didn’t have time to pack winter clothes,” Kalla improvised again. “But riding double with Feodor most of the way helped.”

*I’d better look cold myself. And tired,* Kalla thought, and gave an imitation of a shiver and then a yawn. She wondered how Feodor had kept from nodding off. Maybe the bracing cold of the flight, despite his shinefur coat.

“Of course, Sebastos. I have a bedchamber to spare for guests. And I’m sure I can find suitable attire for the lady. Come this way.”

Kalla missed her gold necklace. No doubt Feodor would miss it in the days to come. But for now, his only use for their bed would be sleep.

\* \* \*

It was mid-day by the time Feodor awakened. Catapan Lagudes had wisely not tried to rouse him before that. But sleep had done the Patriarch a world of good, and he was in high spirits and full of ideas when they sat down for lunch.

When food and drink arrived, Feodor and Kalla set to work on it. But while Kalla ate and drank mostly in silence, Feodor spoke between bites and swigs.

“The first thing we do, we must summon the themata,” he said at the outset. “We must send riders immediately.”

“You’ll want the forces from the inner and outer themes alike to rally here?”



“Exactly. We’re centrally located. That’s important. That’s why we didn’t stop, and took care not to reveal ourselves, in the inner themes.”

He paused for some of the marinated lamb, washing it down with muscat wine.

“That’s where they’ll have their men looking for us,” he resumed. “That’s where Festus’ army will have to strike first. If the themata there withdraw ahead of them, it will give him a false sense of confidence. Yet we must assure our forces to the South that I have survived, and gather whatever intelligence we can.”

Back to the lamb, which gave Hypatius an opening.

“Did he plan the attempt on your life himself, or could Helena...?”

“She must have talked him into it,” Feodor said after another bite. “She’s insanely jealous of Kalla, after all, but she doesn’t have the brains for anything like that. Festus was a fool to go along; he won’t know for weeks, any better than I will, whether there’s to be an heir. And without that heir, any claim he makes to the throne here won’t have a shred of legitimacy.”

Another piece of lamb, another opening for the catapan.

“What troubles me, Sebastos, is that, barring a miracle, you won’t be there to see the birth of your son, let alone protect him.”

Feodor’s mouth was busy, but after swallowing the lamb, he had a ready answer.

“Oh, Festus will protect him. He’ll have no choice; without a grandson, his cause will be lost.”

“Assuming all goes well with her pregnancy.”

“Indeed. Should Helena miscarry, or any other mischance occur, my own cause will be lost. And we must defeat Festus here – not just decisively but *utterly*, using the

new weapons you have been developing. Otherwise I should have to carry the war to the Gregoras realm – a long and costly enterprise.”

Kalla felt a sudden chill. She had seen death up close, and now Feodor spoke of mass deaths – deaths by the thousands. Having learned something of the history of war on other Seeded worlds, she could appreciate his logic in an abstract sort of way. But there was nothing abstract about what would befall those thousands.

“I have had made great progress with both the boomers and spitters, Sebastos. I shall show you the working models. Your mother, Rulav and Gerta have already seen a demonstration of the spitter; they are in town today seeing to business. Stephanos is with them; he stopped by yesterday, but will be returning to the Northern Reach later this afternoon.”

“Were they impressed?”

“I’m not going to tell you. You must judge for yourself.”

“If they prove satisfactory, we must have the smiths here produce as many as possible under your direction.”

“I have already set them to work casting hollow iron balls for the boomers, and cutting lengths of finger-width water pipes and smoothing them inside to be used for the spitters,” Hypatius said. “And the pellets, of course.”

*And the spitters won’t be used for hunting, Kalla thought. Unless humans were to be considered game.*

Kalla looked at Feodor. His face conveyed a look of determination. And yet it was a grim determination, not that of a man who would take pleasure in what was about to unfold.

\* \* \*

After lunch, they set out for the test area, out of sight – but not out of sound – of the villa.

“First, I must insert the impregnated wick in the slot, and ignite it, then press this lever to let the wick ignite the loose powder in the chamber, which in turn ignites the main charge of powder in the tube, which expels the pellet.”

Hypatius had the spitter mounted on a forked stake, and gripped it two-handed once he had lit the wick with a taper. The weapon nevertheless jumped in his hands as it went off with a loud noise. Even so, the pellet hit the archer’s target borrowed for the day – although far from dead on.

“It seems cumbersome,” Feodor remarked.

“I am well along in years, but I’m sure your soldiers will have steadier aim.”

“But, really, must they all carry tapers as well as the weapons themselves? And keep them lit?”

“My whole idea is to deploy the spitters in fixed positions, protected by barriers of some sort. We might assign soldiers in pairs, each lighting the other’s wicks in turn. We could have candlesticks between them to hold the tapers.”

“One more thing to bring along, in addition to the stakes and the wicks.”

“The wicks are a simple matter; they can be carried by the dozens in pouches.”

Feodor looked doubtful.

“Surely the people of other worlds must have pellet weapons that are simpler to operate.”

Hypatius looked embarrassed.

“Your pardon, Sebastos. The texts you sent me last year indeed speak of such weapons, activated by sparks. But the descriptions are unclear, and the diagrams aren’t any help, as they don’t show how the sparks are produced. If it weren’t for the diagrams of the wick-type spitters, I might never have understood them either. I have done the best that I can.”

“I’m sure that you have,” Feodor said, a hint of apology in his tone. “But it’s going to take a good deal of training and coordination at best. We’d better start that with the forces at hand here as soon as possible. Now, what about the boomers?”

“Those won’t require special training, at least, except for making it clear that their wicks must be lit only when the catapults have been readied to hurl them at the enemy. I don’t have a catapult at hand here, so I shall have to use a much longer wick for a demonstration at that tree.”

He pointed to a tree about 100 strides off. It was old and large, at least five palms in diameter, and leaning slightly away from where they were standing.

“We had best take shelter, even at this distance,” Hypatius said. “I don’t know how far fragments of the ball will fly. The farther the better, obviously, when it comes to battle.”

Kalla had kept her silence through all of this. Her advice was hardly needed, and she was still troubled about the whole boomer-spitter project. And yet she knew that it might be necessary, after all. She remembered the farmers and artisans and merchants from the Harvest Festival here. What would become of them if the Gregoras family had its way? Nothing good...

With some difficulty, Feodor and Hypatius and his guards manhandled a heavy work table hundreds of strides over rough ground from the catapan's home to the site of the demonstration, then placed it on its side with the top towards the house. Then they went back for the boomer, which was too heavy for the catapan; Feodor volunteered to help him with it. They managed to get it down to the tree."

"A favor, Sebastos," Hypatius said. "You can run faster than I can. I have timed the burning of the wicks, and I believe I could make it back and take my position behind the table before... but I can't be certain... if I were to trip..."

"Thousands of my people will have to take risks before this is over," Feodor said. "I can hardly shirk taking mine. Bring me the taper."

A relieved Hypatius returned to his home, and brought back the lit taper. Then he noticed that Kalla was still there by the upended table.

"Get back to the house," he ordered her.

"Yes, you'd better," agreed Feodor, but with a wink that Hypatius couldn't see.

Kalla retreated towards the house, and began removing the overcoat Hypatius had lent her. But before long, she turned back.

*I should see this, she thought. And they won't be looking my way.*

Hypatius had huddled behind the table, and Feodor had headed for the boomer, at a walking pace, the taper in his right hand and his left guarding it against any breeze that might put it out. When he reached the tree, he lit the wick, then came back at a run.

He was in plenty of time, it turned out, to take his place beside Hypatius. Indeed, it seemed to take forever, although it could only have been moments, before...

It was as loud as thunder, but not like thunder – no rumbling, just a deafening blast of sound.

From her vantage by the house, Kalla could see a huge cloud of smoke and dust erupt, rising so quickly and so thickly that she had to use her special vision to see through it – the tree had fallen; its base had been obliterated. At the same moment, she felt a slight tingle on left breast.

*Skietra!* she thought, looking down. Only a tiny hole in her gown, but still... She quickly put the coat back on, and waited for the dust to settle. But she saw that Feodor and Hypatius were all right; they were beginning to get up now, and she took that as a sign to approach them.

“All over?” she shouted from fifty strides away,

Feodor and Hypatius looked around.

“We’re unharmed,” Feodor said. “I’m not sure about the table.”

Hypatius walked around to the other side.

“It’s been hit hard,” he pronounced. “But it held. Ironwood, you know. I can see some larger shards came down behind us, and smaller ones may have carried further. It’s a good thing you were inside.”

Kalla breathed a sigh of relief, but the catapan couldn’t have guessed why.

“Nadezhda thinks the boomers will be of greater use in combat than the spitters, although not in hunting, obviously,” Hypatius said. “On the other hand, Rulav was quite taken with the spitter. He wanted to try it out for himself, but I would never allow that, Sebastos. Not without your leave,”

“Indeed,” Feodor said. “But we had better have both ready for use by the time we have to meet Festus. We can’t afford to take chances.”

As soon as they got back to the villa, he turned to composing the letters under his hand and seal that would be sent by express riders to the themata.

Hypatius made a few suggestions of his own, regarding instructions to themata of the North, but approved the rest. Then they headed for Nesalonika to choose the best riders from among the catapan’s forces. That took the rest of the afternoon. When they returned to the villa near dusk, Feodor took Kalla aside.

“We need to speak in private,” he said.

Once in their bedchamber, he brought her up to date.

“I have advised the strategoi to the South to send all women and children north to safety. All horses suitable for war are to be ridden or driven north. They are also to ship as much food and other necessities as possible. All else is to be destroyed, save what serves the immediate needs of the themata.”

“I don’t understand about the horses.”

“The themata haven’t used cavalry since the accession of Strymon, whereas the Gregoras clan still maintains such a force – they stage tournaments in their homeland, just for show. But while Festus’ forces have thus maintained the skills, they are unlikely to have transported any horses across the sea. Without cavalry, and without sufficient supplies, he will be forced to move on us as quickly as possible – may his haste be his undoing.”

Kalla could only nod in understanding.

“But there is a part that you, and *only* you, can play in our preparations.”

“Because... of what I am?”

“Because you can *fly!* It will take our swiftest riders several days to reach Skolios, even changing horses along the way, and as many to return.”

“Hypatius must think it took us a sevenday to reach here,” Kalla realized.

“And he must continue to think so. By the time he or anyone else here figures out otherwise... well, it should be all over. But right now, I must have immediate intelligence on the numbers and movements of the enemy. Our riders dare not approach Ethrata, and besides being able to fly you obviously have excellent night vision. None of the enemy will suspect that they are being observed. With luck, you may even do more than merely observe.”

“But how—”

“Small acts of sabotage. Against their equipment. I shall not ask you to kill for my sake. Let that burden rest with me. But whatever you can do quickly and invisibly to interfere with their plans and delay their advance.... If they have not landed all their supplies from their ships, that will present an opportunity...”

Kalla nodded in agreement, and Feodor began to explain to her what to look for: had Festus landed his forces yet, did they seem to be organized for an advance, were they building any engines of war? And there were ways that she might interfere without being detected; he laid them out for her.

Hypatius and his staff were abed, and Kalla assumed to be likewise, by the time she was able to slip out a second story window of the catapan’s home and, eluding the guards shoot silently straight up to begin her journey.



## 9. All at Sea

It was well past midnight and raining by the time she reached the fishing village, far to the west of the Ethrata, where the ground sloped gradually to the sea instead of being at the bottom of a cliff as at the Keep.

But there was no fishing now; the small fishing boats had all been dragged far up on shore, and the two docks that usually served trading vessels were occupied by ships of war.

There were dozens of other warships in the harbor, swaying gently against their anchors. Feodor had explained about anchors, and about ocean currents. The sails of the ships were furled, those at anchor as well as those at the docks. Festus' troops had all come ashore, and most of them had marched to Ethrata; there must be thousands of them there.

Feodor's capital had been turned into an armed camp. There wasn't any sign of civilians; they must have fled or been driven out... or worse. There were few horses in the vicinity – and most of those were draft animals from the farms, which were hardly suitable for cavalry charges. Nor was there any sign of construction – but then it had been only a little over a day...

There were crates on the dock, filled with metal devices, perhaps parts for what Feodor called catapults, plus supplies of arrows and lances, and containers for some sort of liquid. She didn't have time to make a complete inventory.

There were more crates on the boats. Only there were men aboard, too. She wouldn't kill, even for Feodor. And actually sinking the boats would surely seem... too supernatural. But she could at least set them adrift. Breaking iron bars was easy for her;

she had demonstrated that for Feodor. It would be the same with anchor chains. The men on the ships, she knew, would not be looking down into the water – even if they could by the dark of night.

Kalla flew high over the harbor, thankful for the rain that had driven Festus' men ashore to shelter and would make it hard for them to spot her, then descended slowly into the sea. Rather than snap the anchor chains, she pulled them apart as silently as possible, swimming from one ship to the next. With all deliberate speed, she did her invisible work – and only towards the end did the guards catch on, as their ships began to drift visibly at the mercies of the currents. She could hear alarms being shouted from the nearest. She surfaced briefly, only her head above water; soldiers on shore were sounding trumpets to spread the alarm. There were a few ships still anchored, but she decided to leave them alone rather than risk even a slight chance of discovery.

She swam far out into the harbor, well beyond the drifting ships, before taking to the air for the flight back to Nesalonika. Finding the first bridge along the Great Northern Road north of Ethrata unguarded, she swooped down and smashed it. The stream that it crossed wasn't a great one, but deep enough, she reckoned, to delay the passage of any engines of war.

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"You have done well," Feodor said when she reported in. "I shall have another rider dispatched immediately to bring the strategos Doukas at Skolios up to date, and he can also leave word at Segilla and other villages along the way. But as the strategos in the immediate path of Festus, Doukas may need advisories that can be carried faster

than by horseback. Do you think that you could disguise yourself as a refugee from the capital?”

“And if I could, why should the strategos pay any heed to me?”

“Because he will have been told that I still have secret contacts at the Keep. And because you will bear a pass under my hand and seal – backdated to the night we left, naturally.”

“I can hardly hide my hair, or even my eyes, from view.”

“You will dress in black as one who has taken religious vows, face veiled. You will approach Skolios only by night, and present yourself to his nightwatch. If Strategos Doukas himself should recognize you, tell him that you are only a go-between for my actual agent, whose identity must be protected at all costs.”

## **10. Love and Hate**

It took three days for one of the weavers in Nesalonika to prepare her disguise; he didn't have any idea who it was for, although he was told it was for a ruse against the enemy. That was enough for him.

Carrying a bundle that included her religious dress and her credentials, Kalla set out again that night. She made a pass over Ethrata, and saw no change there. At the fishing village, the warships had been roped together, and there was an accumulation of crates of war materiel piled along the shore. Soldiers were loading these onto wagons for the journey to the invaders' encampment.

But something else caught her eye: a line of stakes, from which hung bodies. Fishermen by the look of them. She could tell that they had been mutilated, and she realized that they must have taken the blame for her sabotage the night before.

*So I have blood on my hands, after all,* she thought. She averted her eyes from the victims, glaring at one of the crates of weapons. At that moment, she hated herself, and hated Feodor.

And then something strange happened: a burst of light down on the shore, right before her eyes, *right where she was looking*. A fire was rising from the crate, but there was nobody nearby to have set it. At the same time, she felt a slight weakness – not as much as from the touch of gold, but...

As soldiers noticed the fire and rushed to put it out, Kalla felt a sense of dread – she remembered from her reading aboard the *Bountiful Voyager* about the people of a world called Tanzrobi, who could bring down game with heat from their very eyes, who could *kill* with those eyes.

*But surely we were never meant to be killers,* she thought. *We were meant to serve as mates to the Galen, until they... Did they lie to us about that, did they lie to the Priests. But why?*

There was no way of finding out; none on Velor knew that they could fly, that they could see through walls outside the gold field – or even that there was a gold field. How could they possibly know about this? As she turned back, heading for her rendezvous, she had another thought:

*Should I tell Feodor? Would he want me to use this against the enemy?*

Kalla's thoughts were in such turmoil that she lost her sense of direction. She had to take her bearings against the fishing village, straighten up and fly right back to the Keep and then up the Great Northern Road to keep her appointment with Babylas Doukas. What else was there to do?

What did she owe Feodor? What did he owe her?

*He should have **told me** what Festus' men would do,* she reproached him in her mind. *He surely knew this would happen. He **must** have known...*

She would have to think about it, think long and hard. But she tried to look on the bright side.

*I am still bound to the Patriarch, even as I was bound to the High Priest on Velor, Should I thank Skietra that I am not so bound to such a man as Festus?*

\* \* \*

The nightwatch at Skolios was impressed with her dress and her credentials. Strategos Doukas was not.

He was already abed at his home when the watch called to him, and let out with a curse before his men could explain what it was all about. "Just a moment," he said, and they heard him fumbling around. When he came to the front door, he was carrying an ornamental lantern, which he held up before Kalla's face.

One of the watchmen presented her credentials. Babylas glanced at them, and at Kalla, then dismissed the watchmen brusquely. Then he motioned Kalla inside.

"We've met before, haven't we?" he began.

"I hardly think so," she said. "We—"

“You do not have the true look of a cloistered sister. But then, that comes from lack of experience. True sisters never bathe; they have a certain air about them. Not to mention that their attire is rarely in such pristine condition.”

Kalla was speechless.

“We were greatly relieved to learn that Feodor is alive and well, from the rider who reached here this morning and is now enjoying a well-earned sleep. Refugees from Ethrata had already told us that he had escaped the Keep, along with his Companion. We also have word from them about the death of Melitas, which I am sure will sadden him. But I have yet to be learn how he and Kalla managed to reach Nesalonika without passing this way.”

“I cannot enlighten you on that,” Kalla managed to get out.

Babylas broke out into laughter.

Kalla dropped her veil, along with her pretense. She didn't bother with Feodor's backup story.

“The look on your face,” he said when he recovered himself. “You are still new among us, and have much to learn. Well, Feodor has his ways, and I'm not about to question them, as long as he has his plans well in hand. But what brings you here?”

She told him about the ships and the weapons – and the fate of the fishermen.

“The containers must hold pitch, used in fire weapons. The rest we knew already, including the same sort of abominations that so shocked you. You're hardly the first to come through here, you know. We've had swarms of refugees.”

“How many?”

“Over a thousand. And still more may have taken other routes, fearing that the enemy may be patrolling the Great Northern Road. Those who remained have been impressed to scour the countryside for all the food that can be found – the farmers had already fled when they heard of the invasion.”

“Feodor told me they’d be in need of food.”

“And though they feed them, they may not suffer the foraging parties to live after they have done their work. Some had refused the work, and they were tortured for sport before they were put to death.”

*Like the fishermen, Kalla thought. But the fishermen hadn’t even resisted.*

“The refugees have had much to tell,” Babylas continued. “I have sent them on northwards, like our own families. I trust that you will relay this to the Patriarch at the earliest opportunity.”

“I shall,” she promised. But Babylas had another concern.

“It is true about these weapons, then?”

“I have seen them with my own eyes. But it will take time to build enough of them to be decisive. Fortunately for us, Festus has suffered some... ill fortune that will delay him in deploying his men and arms. He may suffer more in the days to come. I can see that he will have to move soon, before his food runs out. But I am sure the Patriarch will spare no effort to be ready for him.”

“We are sending as much food North as we can, and packing as much as we can carry for our own use. The rest will be put to the fire. Let Festus try to live off the land after we have done with it. It will be hard on us, to destroy what we have worked so hard to build, but it will be harder on them, by the time they meet Feodor in battle.”

*In battle...* She dreaded that word, still. Yet whatever her feelings about Feodor, about the war, about the whole idea of war, Kalla knew that this was not the time to show them. Babylas was a good man, and she must give him hope that his sacrifices and those of rest of Skolios would not be in vain.

“You will be recompensed. Your mill will be rebuilt. All that is taken from you and your people will be restored. I have the Patriarch’s word on that.”

“As we fight for him, we fight for ourselves. We know the face of the enemy, even if we cannot see him from here. We dare not yield to such as torture poor fishermen and townsmen, and rape serving girls, and then proclaim: ‘God wills it.’”

“Serving girls?”

“As I told you, we have our sources, and we are spreading the word. Some of the victims are among the refugees bearing witness from one town to the next as they make their way northwards. If Festus thought to find allies there, he will find few indeed as word of his arrogance and stupidity become notorious throughout the land.”

He paused for a moment.

“I don’t think that your relationship with the Patriarch will count against yourself or the Patriarch any longer, in light of Helena’s treachery. But to place you in danger on such an errand as this—”

“I volunteered for it,” Kalla interrupted.

“Then you are a courageous woman. I begin to understand what Feodor must see in you – beyond your beauty.”

Kalla felt embarrassed, yet she knew that she couldn’t even hint at the truth.



Babylas beckoned her to his study, where he had been compiling a field report for the Patriarch the day before in to be sent back with the rider. He added her remarks about the pitch containers, then sealed the report.

He looked up at her.

“You are very easy to recognize, even though a veil. I have something here that I recognize, and that I think you will recognize. It was spirited out of Helena’s quarters by one of those serving girls, who was treated as a whore even as Helena proclaimed that what had belonged to the Feodor’s whore now belonged to her. This girl risked her life to shame Helena, and to aid our cause; but we have sufficient resources in hand, so...”

Babylas reached into a drawer and withdrew a necklace. *Her* necklace.

“What was this girl’s name?”

“Loukia.”

The name was vaguely familiar, but she couldn’t put a face to it. Of course, if she had been a servant to Helena, their paths might never have crossed. And yet, when it came to the kind of courage Babylas had thought to see in her, this poor servant put her to shame.

“Thank you,” she said, accepting the necklace. “I shall see that she is honored.”

Babylas insisted that she stay the night in Skolios, and set out for Nesalonika the next morning with Feodor’s rider. She tried to beg off, but she couldn’t find a reason that wouldn’t seem suspicious.

Back under gold, and no danger to horse or rider, she could hardly refuse.

*Besides*, she thought, it will give me time to think. I need to think

## 11. Training Ground

“*Kalla!*” Feodor exclaimed when Kalla arrived at the villa a day late. “What the hell happened?”

“What happened was that the disguise didn’t work. Then Babylas made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.” She explained about the strategos insisting that she come to Nesalonika with Feodor’s rider.

“I managed to lose him in Bizye,” she continued, that being the next town north from Skolios. “I told him I could get a horse of my own there. So he rode on and I flew on. The rider – Archelus, his name was, a really talkative fellow – didn’t know who I am. And I had to take a great deal of care not to give him any hint of *what* I am.”

Feodor pondered that for a moment.

“Without the necklace, I suppose you did the best you could. It’s hard to plan for situations like this.”

“In any case, Babylas sends his regards. And I can tell you most of what’s in the dispatch Archelus is bringing. Most of the people in and around Ethrata have fled, and they’re on their way north. Festus is making a lot of enemies, but he doesn’t seem to care. Babylas and, I presume the others, are carrying out your orders.”

There was a sudden loud noise from way out back.

“Hypatius is supervising the spitter training,” Feodor explained, looking up from the dispatch. I had to make up a story to explain your absence, that we’d had a quarrel.”

“Did he find that hard to believe?”

“He would never say so, whatever he believed,”

“We had best go and assure Hypatius that our lover’s quarrel is ended.”

“I presume you saw the progress on our fortifications down by the river,” Feodor inquired.

“Is that what the *wooden fences* are supposed to be? Your riders have wondered about them.

There was another loud noise from the training ground

“They are for deployment of the spitters. We still have only one at the moment, but I’m having more forged as quickly as possible. Hypatius and I agreed that it’s best to have his soldiers take turns training with the first one, instead of waiting for the rest to be completed. Come down and see.”

“I’ll be with you as soon as I’ve changed,” said Kalla, and headed into the house to remove her religious garments – and the necklace she’d hidden beneath them. She emerged a few minutes later in Romaic winter dress.

The sounds from the spitter seemed to be coming more frequently, she noticed, as she ran to catch up with Feodor.

“Reconciled, I see,” Hypatius remarked archly when she arrived.

Nadezhda was already there with Rulav and Gerta. Feodor greeted them warmly, but his mother’s response was chillier than the weather.

“Your company does not become you,” she said.

Hypatius intervened to head off a scene.

“Your mother has taken a keen interest in the training program,” he said. “And so have your brother and sister. They wisely stayed away from the boomer demonstration, but there isn’t any risk here.”

The onlookers were far outnumbered by the soldiers of the catapan, who were taking turns with the spitter. As Hypatius had proposed a few days earlier, they were working in pairs, one taking aim and the other supplying powder and wicks and lighting the wicks.

As Feodor and Kalla took their places with the catapan, one of the soldiers fired the spitter and made a hit near the center of the target. The man had held the weapon steady when it discharged, she noticed,

“They’re getting better at it,” Hypatius said. “They’re used to the kickback by now. That’s something they’ve never had to deal with as bowmen.”

The dozens of soldiers were lined up double. They wore standard military dress, tunics and high boots, but had forsaken their swords and shields: those would only get in the way here. Two by two, they took the places before the mount for the spitter, and went through the drill under Damian, kentarch of the hundred men of the senior unit of the city droungos, which was in turn part of the Strymon theme.

The kentarch would shout “fill” and the weaponeer would open the chamber and fill it with explosive powder from his partner’s shoulder pouch.

“Insert!” the commander would shout, and the weaponeer would be handed a wick from another pouch, insert it in the chamber, and snap the chamber shut.

“Mount!” came the order, and the weaponeer would place the spitter securely on its support.

“Light!” The partner would take the taper and ignite the wick.

“Aim!” came the order, and the weaponeer would sight along the spitter’s tube.

“Steady!” That means getting and keeping a firm grip.

There was a wait of a few seconds, but it seemed longer, as the wick burned its way into the chamber, ignited the charge in the tube, and sent the pellet on its way.

All that was the easy part. Before the spitter could be used again, the tube had to be recharged, a wad of cloth tamped in against the charge, and a fresh pellet tamped in against the wad. Pellets were easy to produce but... it was time-consuming, even with practice, to arm the spitters.

“This is too slow. It just won’t do,” Nadezhda complained. “And why should *she* be here?”

“*Mother!*” said Rulav, disapprovingly.

Gerta frowned but said nothing.

At that point, Hypatius ordered a break.

“Mother does have a point,” Feodor conceded, and not for the sake of family ties. “Is this *really* how spitters are used in combat on other worlds? Our bowmen can shoot volley after volley in the time it takes spitters to get off one shot.”

“I cannot say, Sebastos. The Olympian text and the diagrams have been my only guide. I had to come up with the pouches and the design of the barrier myself.”

“I understand about the barrier. The crosspieces will support the tubes...”

“And the narrow spaces between the uprights will enable our swordsmen to deal with any of the enemy who make it that far.”

“But how can we coordinate the weaponeers over the entire length of the barrier, and in the heat of battle? How are they going to hear those commands?”

“Hypatius...”

It was Rulav, an eager look on his face.

All eyes turned to the younger Andros, who had rarely if ever had anything to say beyond ordinary pleasantries.

Feodor seemed displeased, but Kalla couldn't tell whether it was because Rulav had spoken up at all, or because he had addressed the catapan instead of his brother the Patriarch. A moment later, Rulav seemed to answer that question.

"Your pardon, Feo... Sebastos."

"Have you something to contribute here?" Feodor asked.

"I was thinking we could use trumpets."

"Trumpets?"

"Trumpet calls are already used in battle. But shinefur hunters also use them to signal each other on narrow passages in the Northern Reach, where there isn't room for their wagons to pass each other. They signal well in advance that they are coming to a place wide enough for a pull-off, and the northbound wagons yield to let the southbound ones through. But we have trumpet codes to identify each hunting team, so it becomes a matter of exchanging greetings as well as speeding the shipments to the merchants."

"There was an inordinate need for haste in the shipments when the Scalantrans called," Nadezhda complained.

Rulav and Gerta frowned at her, but said nothing.

*She won't let it go, Kalla thought. She'll never accept me. And yet we need her.*

Feodor ignored her, instead answering Rulav.

"Indeed, we have our trumpet calls, to signal movements of every kind. But the soldiers manning the spitters must remain in place."

“That is true, F.. Sebastos. But we can devise trumpet calls that substitute for the commands of the kentarch, and be heard for the entire length of the barrier.”

“But we can’t have them all firing at once; the enemy will come charging when they see how long it takes to prepare the next volley.”

“That is the entire object, Sebastos. We can divide them into two or more teams when we know the best times they can make between volleys. Then we intersperse members of each team across the whole front, and give each a recognition call. Thus, we can have repeated volleys; they will seem almost continuous.”

“We? Do you mean to take part in this?”

“By your leave.”

“Out of the question!”

“You yourself will be there to face the enemy. Why not—”

“Because I am your Patriarch, and so command it.”

“Sebastos,” Rulav said sheepishly.

Hypatius looked at Rulav, and then at Feodor.

“It might just work,” he said. “We should summon a trumpeter, and see if we can make it work.”

“Very well,” said the catapan. And to Damian, “Carry on.”

Rulav joined Hypatius as he left, and Nadezhda and Gerta tagged along.

Kalla motioned Feodor aside.

“We need to talk.”

“About Nadezhda? There’s nothing to discuss.”

“No. Not about Nadezhda.

## 12. Test of Faith

“There’s no way I can force you,” Feodor admitted. “And I doubt that your people would consider it covered by the terms of your indenture.”

It was only after he agreed not to involve her any further in preparations for the war that Kalla excused herself for a few moments to retrieve the necklace from its hiding place. The look on his face when she returned to the bedchamber they’d shared... well, she’d never seen anything like it before.

“If I’d known about this, I would say that you have certainly mastered the art of hard bargaining,” he said when he regained his composure. “But how did you come by it? Surely you didn’t fly back to...”

“A gift from a woman named Loukia,” she said. “I never even knew her.”

Feodor’s demeanor changed again, to another she’d never seen before.

“I remember her. One of Helena’s servants.”

“So Helena thought. Until some of Festus’ men had their way with her.”

“Is she—?”

“She escaped safely. So Babylas told me. She was sent north. She may even be here now.”

“More refugees are coming in every day. Nomarkh Tomikes is doing all he can to find housing, negotiating with the strategoi of the northern themata to have their families put some of them up until the war is over and then sending them on. Food is arriving in highwheelers; at least they don’t face hunger. But they can’t all find shelter elsewhere, or in inns and homes in town. Hypatius thinks he should do his bit and let some of them stay here.”



“Do you approve?”

“If necessary. We can’t leave them out in the cold, or in tents – the themata can get by in those; they know their duty. But we can’t expect people used to the comforts of home...”

“I understand. We may have a lot of company here.”

“Then let us make the most of what remains of our privacy.”

With that, he removed his clothes and stretched out invitingly on the bed. Kalla, still standing, took off her clothes, and teasingly put on the necklace.

They spent a moment gazing lovingly at each other’s bodies by firelight, then Feodor beckoned to her, and she knelt over him and impaled herself, relishing the feel of him against all her pleasure points. Her nipples were already erect; he reached out to tweak them, and she responded by grinding herself against him while looking him in the eyes and smiling. He was gasping, trying not to come too fast, but he couldn’t resist for long when she began moving up and down on him.

“Kalla!” he cried. “Oh God, Kalla!”

“Feodor!” she cried, as her orgasm answered his.

It didn’t take the Patriarch long to recover, and it was then that they began to make love in earnest, slowly and deliberately, exchanging deep kisses, then kissing and caressing their way up and down each other’s bodies.

“It still seems strange that you don’t have any hair down there,” Feodor said, as he began burying his face in her nether region, nibbling on her clit and drinking her fragrant juices. “And it seems even stranger that you smell and taste like... honey and wildflowers.”

“It’s strange that you *do* have hair down there,” Kalla said, after taking him in her mouth and draining him eagerly when next he came, under the relentless teasing of her lips and tongue. “I trust the Scalantrans will tell future Companions not to worry about men of worlds like yours having hair *on* their penises... and by the way, you taste very good too.”

Feodor laughed at that, but only for a moment.

“So you’ve told me before. Helena would never have... you know.”

“Are most women like her?”

“I doubt it. Just women of her... class. Or the more devout, who consider what we’ve been doing especially sinful – a violation of the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. But it’s not something that’s talked about much.”

The fire had burned low, so Kalla took another log and placed it carefully on top of the others, heedless of the heat and flame.

“A year ago, I would never have believed there could be a such a creature as you,” Feodor said. “A woman who can fly like an angel, who is more powerful than the gods of legend, whom nothing can harm. I feel as if I have been favored by a pagan goddess... Aphrodite. Only... you have some of Athena in you.”

“I don’t believe in gods and goddesses,” she said. “But I believe you are a good man, and for that I am thankful.” *Skietra grant that the others have been as fortunate.*

They made love again, until Feodor was exhausted and she knew she must let him sleep. As she looked at him in repose, she could hardly believe how angry she had been with him after her second intelligence mission.

What she'd heard from Babylas about the cruelty of Festus and his men had given her second thoughts, but she had still been resolved that the war was none of her business. She wanted no part of it. She had told Feodor about the fishermen, but held back about the discovery of her heat vision. She was troubled about that. But although she was no longer troubled about Feodor, she had a small shred of doubt about herself.

*To stay out of it... am I really doing the right thing?*

\* \* \*

Three days later, they were awakened early in the morning by an incessant pounding on the door.

“Sebastos!”

Hypatius shouted loudly enough to wake the whole household.

Feodor, leaped from under the covers, and ran to the door without even putting on a robe.

“I have grave word, Sebastos,” the catapan said as he was ushered in. “Festus has attacked Segilla.”

Hypatius was not even paying attention to the fact that the Patriarch was naked – Kalla had wrapped a blanket around herself.

“How can this be?” Feodor asked.

“Someone must have shown him a route through the mountains, Sebastos. All I know is what we have heard from a stable keeper who was north of town exercising a new horse when they struck – he fled here immediately, and warned all the strategoi he passed along the way. But the themata of Segilla are lost, and those south of there cut off.”

“Is Festus on the march here?”

“No one knows. No one knows whether his entire army was engaged at Segilla, or he split up his forces and has another detachment moving on Skolios. Perhaps he intends to crush the southern themata between them, or he may simply ignore them and pursue his advantage in our direction.”

Feodor was shivering and, Kalla thought, not just because the fire had burned down and he was naked. And in that moment, she reproached herself.

*He needed my eyes. He needed what only I can do. And I denied him.*

If Feodor felt the same way, he showed no sign of it.

“The themata between Segilla and here can fight a delaying action,” he said. “We need enough time to deploy the new weapons. Only that, and numbers won’t matter.”

“It will be at a heavy cost, Sebastos.”

“I know. But it can’t be helped. Everything we hold dear is at stake – not just our lives, but the lives of our people, and their children and their children’s children.”

“At least the field is prepared” Hypatius said. “The river is too broad, too swift and too deep for him to cross. Festus must approach along the road, across the bridge. Our fences on both flanks extend to the river; he won’t know what to make of them, and we can deploy bowmen there to further confuse him. And then...”

“If all goes according to plan. Only if all goes according to plan.”

“We have to have the boomers and spitters ready. I will so inform the smiths, and bid them work on nothing else.”

It was only after Hypatius left that Kalla turned to Feodor.

“Sebastos,” she said humbly, “I would lend you my eyes again

## 13. Eyes in the Sky

She flew by day now, seeming to throw caution to the winds. But not all caution; at her height, she would be taken for a bird. Of course, she had to get far enough away from town, and even the villa, to avoid being seen taking off.

On the first day, she could see that the Gregoras army had burned Segilla. There was no sign of living inhabitants, but there were clusters of bodies in nearby fields and woods. She averted her eyes from them, not wanting to count the cost of her own folly.

“It *wasn't* your fault,” Feodor had insisted. “I’d never guessed that Festus would make this kind of a move. I never thought he had it in him. I’d never have sent you to look for anything like it... and it wasn’t your fault that Archelus didn’t make it.”

That was all probably true, she thought. But it didn’t make her feel any better. Neither did what she saw below. The enemy had been rounding up horses, all the riding horses it could find in the area. At least a couple of hundred: not much for a cavalry force, but more than Feodor could muster – assuming that Festus had men trained to ride them in combat, and that was a good assumption.

“They carry lances, which are mostly for show in tournaments,” Feodor had told her. “But they can also wield longswords to cut off men’s heads, and the most skilled among them can shoot arrows from the saddle.”

Besides horses, the enemy had apparently captured a good supply of foodstuffs; there were fully-loaded highwheelers manned by soldiers. But if the Gregoras forces had been short of food when they arrived here, they could advance no faster than the highwheelers – and they wouldn’t have any more luck further north, where the themata had been forewarned and the towns and villages would be stripped bare.

How large a force did Festus have? How could she count them?

Feodor had told her that the organization structures of both armies were similar to those of the Romaic Empire back on Earth, but much simplified: the kentarchi of about a hundred men each, the droungos of about five hundred, and the themata (the Gregoras realm called them tourma) of a thousand or more – in the Andros realm, that depended on their population. This was still a lightly settled world, the Scalantrans had told her, even centuries after Seeding.

Unfortunately, the forces in Segilla weren't all lined up neatly in units, but milling around on various errands. Still, she guessed that they must number in the thousands. There had been about fifty boats at the harbor by the fishing village; Feodor reckoned that they could carry at least a hundred men each in addition to supplies – with their lateen sails, they didn't have to make room for ranks of rowers, which he said had been the case in ancient times.

Kalla flew on, over the towns and villages beyond Segilla to the south. Themata there had gathered at full strength, armored and armed – somebody must have gotten word to them. But when she continued southward, she came in for a shock: there was another Gregoran army marching north, and marching by ranks. She counted the units: they must total five thousand or more. Reinforcements must have come on other ships; turning towards the harbor, however, she was surprised to see few vessels there – had the rest returned home for still more men? Probably not, or those already here wouldn't have launched their offensive.

The army south of Skolios, she noticed, was bringing wheeled catapults. She'd seen none in Segilla, but perhaps Festus was counting on the second force catching up

with the one there. The themata would delay them, of course, but they were hopelessly outnumbered and could be overwhelmed one by one unless they could join forces – and even then...

She thought of the catapults, sending pots of flaming pitch against the themata. She imagined Babylas and other good people she'd met being burned alive. She could *do* something about that, at least, and without even killing anyone. But *should* she? She searched her soul, and found rage there – rage she could project through her eyes.

One, two, three, four, five – she set the catapults ablaze. The men around them scattered. Let them think it was some sort of message from their invisible god!

But suddenly she felt weak; she was actually *falling*. With a last burst of energy, she swerved away from the path of the army, hoping that she wouldn't be seen even as she lost altitude. She came down in a dense thicket far off the road, on ground so rough that it wasn't fit for farming or grazing. She felt lucky that no one was there to see her.

Only, had she been damaged somehow? More likely that using heat vision took too much out of her. She'd felt a touch of that the last time, but she'd thought that it was only emotional.

Some instinct seemed to take over. She looked at the sun, which was high in the clear sky, and it was as if she were reaching out to it, or something beyond it – as if she were soaking up energy from the heavens. Whatever was happening, it seemed to be restoring her strength. She felt a sense of exhilaration, like when she was flying, but far more intense. Perhaps, without knowing it, she had been tapping the same source of energy all along, only at a lesser and more constant level.

*Should I tell Feodor?* she asked herself. *Should I have any secrets from him?*

In the days that followed, she put off making a decision, and kept putting it off. But she had the excuse that she was busy – very busy. And she *was*. Feodor wanted daily reports on the movements of the enemy, and she knew how vital those were. She also knew, as he didn't, that further sabotage could be... risky.

The second day, Festus' main force at Segilla began moving north, with about a hundred of the men mounted. Now marching in ranks, they were easier to count: some 10,000, twice as many as Feodor had reckoned on. The themata at Skolios had also begun marching north – did they mean to attack the Gregoras main force from the rear? Did they even know about the second force advancing from Ethrata?

She tried to listen in from afar on the commands being given by Babylas and his officers, but caught only the most routine orders. Whatever his intentions, they were already known to his men. Other themata between Segilla and Skolios had still been in place; they must have been waiting for Babylas to join them – she should have given *them* a listen.

Festus' second force was also on the move, but more slowly than she would have expected; perhaps they were nervous after the inexplicable loss of their catapults. They had obviously planned on joining the main force, or why the catapults at all? And where *was* Festus? With the main force, presumably. And he couldn't have any way to communicate with the other.

The man at the head of the force looked nothing like Feodor's description of the Gregoras lord, whom she had never seen. Among others who seemed to be in positions of command, there were several possible matches.



“Perhaps he isn’t with them at all,” said Feodor when she reported back. “Festus has no real experience at war; he leaves that to his commanders... at the head of the column, was there a man with a *really* long gray beard?”

Kalla remembered the beard, and said as much.

“Phokas Tzimisces,” Feodor said. “Old enough to have secured the Gregoras’ control of the Western Continent forty years ago. He’s a man who would have the savvy for the kind of flanking attack we suffered at Segilla – Festus would never have it in him. Now that Tzimisces is on the move, he’ll brook no delay. We can expect him in five days at the most.”

\* \* \*

If Kalla had inadvertently brought news that was very bad, Hypatius had some that was very good: the smiths had completed work on a hundred spitters and a dozen boomers. Catapults for the latter had been set up behind Feodor’s main position, and the flanking fences had been completed.

The entire droungos of the city had had time for at least some practice with the spitters, and Hypatius had organized the best of them into four teams of 50 men each – 25 weaponeers, 25 partners. That was stretching them pretty thin, but they were to be reinforced by hundreds of bowmen – whose job was both to mislead Tzimisces and guard the flanks if the weaponeers faltered.

And, thanks to Rulav, even the trumpeters were ready.

## 14. Day of Destiny

It was early in the morning, dank and cold and overcast, and the field of battle was still shrouded in mist as the enemy approached. Tzimisces' army could be heard before it could be seen – except by Kalla, who whispered updates to Feodor.

“Tzimisces is at the front, on horseback,” she said. “Whatever else, he is no coward.”

“That is only to be expected. He has always fought his own battles.”

They were on a hilltop overlooking the field, which was like half of a shallow bowl cut off at the river. Feodor's main force of 6,000 men was drawn up along the highest point of the ridge, which the Great Northern Road climbed on its way to Nesalonika. The rest of the themata, 2,000 in all, were stationed behind the fences.

“They have reached the bridge,” Kalla whispered a short time later. “The komes is talking with another man on horseback. He is dressed in white, and his horse is white.”

“They want to parley.”

Like a ghostly apparition, the man in white on the white horse emerged from the white mist, boldly riding up to confront the themata. And when he spoke, it was not in a whisper.

“Phokas Tzimisces, komes of the true army of Romaia, loyal servant of the true Basileus Festus Gregoras, defender of the true Romaic Orthodox Church, offers mercy to the pretender Feodor Andros and all his men. To wit: the pretender and his family are to withdraw to the Northern Reach, where they may remain undisturbed. All of his men who surrender now and swear allegiance to the true Basileus Festus Gregoras and to

the true Romaic Orthodox Church, may return to their homes and families and carry on their pursuits as subjects and tenants of the True Basileus, keeping the faith of the True Romaic Orthodox Church.”

“I’d better give him my answer,” Feodor said. “And you had better return home. Those who have seen you must wonder why you are here in the first place.”

She was there because the Patriarch wanted to assure her that he was prepared for battle, that all the men and weapons were in place. With words and gestures, he explained his plan of battle, and thanked her for her part – for her latest observations the night before. “Your eyes have done enough,” he said.

“I understand,” Kalla said – which didn’t make her happy about it. She turned and began walking towards town, as Feodor strode down the hill in the opposite direction. She turned and saw him join Hypatius at the rear of his army’s ranks, and the soldiers parted for him as he made his way to the front. No one was looking her way, so she floated up into the higher branches of a tree, part of a forest between the field and the town – the better to see, and hear, the Patriarch confront the enemy’s emissary.

“Hear this, and convey it to your sovereign, if he is anywhere within reach. I am Feodor Andros, Patriarch, and I speak for myself and not through underlings. I am the true Patriarch of this world, by right of marriage, sanctioned to by your sovereign, who has no cause to bring his army against me and my people. My people are true men and proud, not mere subjects and still less tenants. That is by my choice and theirs. We have no quarrel with the people of the Gregoras realm, save what your sovereign has brought upon us. We wish only to be left in peace, but you have come uninvited to our

shores, and committed outrages too many to be counted. Yet I too offer mercy: return whence you have come, and all shall be forgiven.”

There was silence for a moment, before the emissary responded.

“Let the pretender and his men know this: Helena, daughter of the true Basileus Festus Gregoras, has borne a son, whom she has named Jayar. He has been baptized in the Romaic Orthodox Church. He is the true heir of both families, and through him the world can achieve unity and peace as it cannot through such a treasonous and futile an exercise as this I see before me.”

Feodor must be shocked; Kalla thought; even though he had expected to hear word of his son’s birth by now, he couldn’t have imagined hearing it in this manner – and to having his son made a pawn. Yet he rose to the occasion.

“Your sovereign seems to forget that a son must have a father. I am that father, and he is *my* heir. I hold your sovereign responsible for his safety and well-being, and should he fail in this, it will go hard for him, and for any who abet him.”

Feodor had been talking at the top of his voice, as had the emissary, for both knew that they were not simply addressing each other. The Patriarch turned about to face his men.

“What say you to Festus’ emissary,” he asked them.

The response began in the front ranks, among those with swords and shields but soon spread to the bowmen and the engineers behind and the other bowmen and the weaponeers on the flanks – a chant for the victory they sought here today:

***Feodor kai Nika! Feodor kai Nika! Feodor kai Nika!***

As the chant rose to a crescendo, it was the emissary who turned about, riding began to ride back to his side. And as if it had been ordained by fate, the mist began to clear.

\* \* \*

Perched in the tree, unseen the armies as she watched the battle unfold, Kalla remembered her conversation with Feodor on the hilltop.

She had reported that Tzimisces had left the highwheelers behind to speed his advance, that the themata from above Segilla were still approaching the Gregoras rear, although it would take them another day. Festus' force – if he was indeed commanding it – was still on a slow march northwards.

“Perhaps he wants to delay his arrival until Tzimisces has won the day, and then take the credit,” he theorized.

*“Your eyes have done enough.”* Words of dismissal.

But she had chosen to defy him now, after their conversation on the hilltop. *My eyes have helped set the stage for this. I will not avert them now. I will not leave without seeing what I have wrought.*

She saw Tzimisces leading with his infantry – which was only to be expected, since even now, as she had told Feodor, he had only about 500 mounts, and those not used to battle. They knew how to gallop; the komes must think that would be enough.

“At least the field is prepared,” Feodor had told her. “The river is too broad, too swift and too deep for him to cross. Festus must approach along the road, across the bridge. Our fences on the rises to both our flanks extend to the river; he won't know what to make of them, but as they are too far for the bowmen we will place there to assist us in

battle, he will assume they are merely to cordon his forces and leave them alone once he realizes they are too hard to assail. With such a vastly superior force he will think he can just rush forward at our main body and then destroy the flanks after we are finishing. And then..."

Crossing the Strymon bridge was a slow process. That bridge had taken a great deal of time and effort and expense for the catapanate, Feodor explained. Even so, the enemy commander would have to wonder why it had been left standing.

"We'll have to lull his suspicions with a feint," Feodor had said.

He now launched that attack, sending a few score of men of the Nesalonika droungos who weren't assigned to the fenced flanks against the enemy. Swordsmen engaged, and the first blood was shed; Kalla covered her eyes for a moment. She had seen death by now, more than once. The way Feodor killed the priest was a mercy in comparison – at least there had been no blood – but now she saw it spilled like red wine from a thousand amphoras.

It was so... fast! Tzimisces army was a human carpet that filled the far banks of the river shoulder to shoulder. From that unbroken mass, men were harried to take the bridge, a constant thick torrent of them racing across only to be shot down before making the midpoint by Hypatius' archers. Kalla watched, horrified as one red-haired young man no older than herself reached the bridge. She knew that he must see the endless rain of arrows strike his comrades but he did not seem to be deterred. He seemed to gather his strength and then break into a sprint. Roaring defiance, sword flashing at his side, he raced even as men to his left and right stumbled and fell, even as the line in front of him thinned and arrows sprouted from the bridge like an unholy harvest. He swerved around

falling men, jumped over their bodies and vaulted heaps of the dead. Kalla thought he might actually make it all the way to the other end of the bridge... until an arrow snapped his red head back and he ran no more.

A torrent of running men poured across the bridge. Those closest to the bridge would race forward in an unbroken stream and be shot down, many tumbling over the side of the bridge to be taken by the swift river.

As the men under Tzimisces fell by the score, piling up atop each other like logs for the fire, Kalla saw more men die in a few minutes than she could have ever imagined. And this was only the beginning of the battle.

It was the arrows that finally ended the bridge's defense. Not those belonging to Tzimisces; while a few of his archers did manage to mount the bridge and even pick off some of the swordsmen before being killed themselves, they could not bring an end to the lethal shower. Instead, Hypatius' bowmen simply ran out of arrows.

From her vantage atop the tree, Kalla had an unrivalled view as archers emptied their quivers and the deadly shower turned to a drizzle and finally dried up entirely. Without the shield of arrows, the swordsmen were a mere thin line against the horde that stormed the bridge.

Kalla thought she had seen the worst, but she was wrong. Bodies run through with arrows were awful sights, but at least they still looked human. When pike men ran the gauntlet and impaled the defending swordsmen on their poles longer than two men, they made their victims look like animals stuck for roasting. Some were still alive, even run completely through by wickedly curved blades, clutching at bloody poles protruding from their bodies and wailing like pigs.

Behind the pikes were Tzimisces's swords and *they* were the most horrific thing yet. Kalla covered her mouth to cover a scream as she saw a sword flash and leave its victim clutching at guts spilling out through a straight cut in his stomach. Arrows simply couldn't compare; she had never even imagined it was possible for one man to cleave another like that.

Seeking some relief, Kalla flicked her eyes across the battlefield, searching out Tzimisces, hoping to see grief and perhaps even an end to this unholy conflict. Surely he couldn't want this slaughter to continue? What of all the men he would lose!

But she had forgotten about the tortured fishermen. When she finally found Tzimisces imperious face atop his horse, surrounded by similarly mounted officers, she saw no shame or heartache but actual pleasure as he watched the defenders finally hacked down.

And *that*, she realized with a cold, horrifying jolt, had been his plan all along. So long as there were bowmen covering the bridge, he could never have crossed; three hundred dead and dying men told him that. But they was less than a twentieth of his army; if he pushed his men forward they would soak up arrows until the defenders exhausted themselves... which was exactly what had had happened.

*How could he be so heartless? She nearly wept. How could he do that to his own men? At least Feodor is defending his land... but these... these invaders are dying simply to take it away from him. Why?*

Though the war had waged for a month, it was a question that she had never had to face, because she had never seen it written in blood before.



Feodor made no further move to challenge the crossing; the enemy forces spread out across the hollow. Some probed the flanks as expected, but when they met heavy fire from the bowmen protecting the spitters, they withdrew out of range to join the frontal attack.

But when about half the Gregoras force had made the crossing, and were nearing Feodor's front ranks, the sound of trumpets came from behind the fences – trumpet calls they must never have heard before, followed by a sound like *nothing* they could have ever heard before.

“The spitters are too few to kill them all, but that isn't the real point,” Feodor had told Kalla. “The real point is that they will be dealing with the unknown. They're hardened soldiers, prepared to look death in the face. But they have always known where death was coming from. Tomorrow, they won't.”

Dozens of the enemy fell from the first volley, without having any idea what had hit them, and hundreds more from the succession of volleys that followed. Those who must be the bravest among them charged the fences, but if they weren't cut down by the spitters, they were cut down by arrows, and the few who actually reached the fences were met by swordsmen who ran them through. Most of those who didn't take part in the charges milled around in fear and confusion, falling dead or wounded at seeming random, and stalling the advance of the rest of Tzimisces' army.

Once again Kalla heard Feodor's voice in her head: “And when they begin to panic – then we counterattack.”

But something was happening that Feodor had not reckoned on: it had begun to rain. Fire from the spitters became ragged, and then almost ceased.

*They can't light their wicks. Or they go out as soon as they're lit.*

Tzimisces' men still couldn't know what had hit them, but they seemed to sense that it was over. Discipline returned to their ranks; they were ready to renew their own attack.

And suddenly, on the other side of the bridge – *cavalry*. The infantry units still on the bridge parted hurriedly to let them pass but not all could make it and were knocked into the river by the riders. Tzimisces and the leaders of the army, sensing victory, had come to be in at the death so that they could claim to have had a first hand in the fall of Feodor.

Kalla looked back to Feodor's main position, and at the catapults behind it. One had already been loaded with a boomer, which in seconds was sailing onto the field, right before the enemy.

It landed. It didn't explode in midair. It just sat there.

Some of the enemy soldiers began to laugh.

*The wick, the wick...*

*And: Is this what it means to feel terrified?*

The enemy began to advance, stepping over the useless cast iron ball. Their footsteps were like the rumble of thunder, a beat that began to increase as they broke into a run, a 10,000-strong wave racing to break over the small rock formed by Feodor and his men.

More boomers fell, with the same result – one even hit a soldier head-on, but...

*They must think they're just rocks, Kalla thought. Like in those sieges Feodor said they used to have here.*

Feeling her heart pound in response to the racing enemy, she searched Feodor's lines for his face, finding it resigned but undeterred; the plans he had spent so long and committed so much hope to were in ruins, swept aside in mere minutes by a mere fluke of the weather. Perhaps they would never have been enough to begin with, perhaps they would merely have postponed his defeat. Whatever might have been, Kalla looked into his eyes and knew he saw death approaching on the upraised points of Tzimisces' swords, yet... he wasn't afraid. Why?

She asked the question, but already knew the answer; because this was his land and his people. He had hoped so much for them, tried to improve their lives and reverse the fate the Seeders had imposed when they failed to educate them as the Scalantrans said they had on every other world. If the darkness of un-enlightenment was to forever wrap his world then he would at least die knowing he had done everything in his power to prevent it.

Could she say the same? Feodor had tried to change the world for the better. Now he was even willing to pay the price by dying with the men he had asked to join him; not commanded, but *asked* – unlike Tzimisces who used his men only as means to a bloody end.

And Kalla? Nothing on this world could hurt her it seemed, not even the boomers. If Feodor and all his men died today, she would be freed even from her contract and with the freedom of the skies, she could go anywhere, find a nice corner of the planet to settle down and live as she wanted. But was that how she wanted to live? Alone, with the memory of Feodor and what he had come to mean to her?

The two sides clashed. Tzimisces' army surging into and around Feodor's like a great fist. The sound of metal clashing and men screaming reached Kalla; she turned her head away, not wanting to see the men dying... for what; their homes? Their lives? A brighter future?

Kalla wanted to fly, to escape the orgy of blood. But how could she turn her back on Feodor? Because, she knew how she could save him, save them all... but it would mean forever staining her hands with the blood of others, something even the Naturalists had never done in the Velorian civil war. Was it a price worth paying?

One unexploded boomer lay towards the middle of the advancing army. She could still see it occasionally between the milling bodies. Already some of the engineers were looking around for rocks, which at least would not smash on contact, but none had been prepared and even if they had been, the catapults were light weapons, built only to hurl the cauldron sized boomers. Though if they had been great field pieces out of Feodor's books, even Kalla's inexperienced eyes could see they would have had no real hope of swaying the battle.

Unless the boomers could save them...

She looked back to the first one, still lying there, ignored by men who stepped around it. Then she looked toward Feodor, face to face with an enemy swordsman, his fine tunic torn and ripped, his feet surrounded by dead allies.

She could not let him die. The feeling rose inside her like a molten bubble, pushing aside all her doubts and fears and concerns about ethics; what would be the point of living on a world if it was ruled by the likes of Tzimisces and Festus?

And if that meant staining her hands and becoming the first Velorian to kill? It was worth the price. Barely.

She focused her eyes on the boomer, focused her fear and anger – and with a clap of thunder, it exploded.

The force of the explosion picked up the men walking around the discarded weapon like leaves, dropping them broken and bloodied on their allies who turned in fear at the great noise and pointed at the wide column of smoke as if it was a demon risen from the ground.

It was, or might as well have been. The dozen or so who had been tossed so contemptuously by the blast had merely been the closest. Around the five foot crater, eighty men lay like scythed grass, the explosion itself, or shards of red hot iron no bigger than her thumb having snatched their lives between heartbeats.

The entire battlefield seemed to draw breath, even those with locked swords turning to watch the horror unfold. It was a hesitation Kalla, blind with anger, took to her advantage. There were a dozen boomers on the field, some cracked and useless, but enough intact. The pouring rain flashed to steam as she projected heat between the awestruck men.

Great tearing explosions moved across the soaked battlefield as Kalla's crystal clear eyes flicked from one sphere to the next, not thinking about what she doing, nor the wave of destruction she was wreaking until the last boomer blew apart and she finally looked upon the consequences of her fury.

*Skietra, what have I done!*

Tzimisces 10,000-strong army had covered the valley like a carpet, stretching from one side to the other and back to the river. But now it was as if some god of fire had burned ragged holes in that carpet; vast holes, two dozen strides wide had been ripped in the living flesh and bone, laying scores, hundreds, a *thousand* dead.

Suddenly the army was reduced to 9,000 scurrying ants, all running at cross purposes as every man wanted to be *away* from this smoking death which had struck with the randomness of a child-god's tantrum. Such was their panic that the mad fear drove many to stab any who stood in their way, even the men and officers of their own side.

It should not have been a defeat. A thousand lay dead and dying but that was just one finger of Tzimisces' vast army; he still had almost twice as many men as Feodor, all he needed to do was restore order and advance.

Only Tzimisces was dead, along with his staff and virtually every senior officer in his army. All had joined him in the cavalry charge to ride down Feodor, all had reined in as he had to assess the terrible destruction of that first boomer, not realizing that they themselves were less than a dozen strides from another equally deadly weapon just as Kalla's eyes found it. She hadn't even noticed them, just the boomer, yet in setting it off, she had decapitated the enemy as surely as if she'd taken a sword and cleaved them apart.

The generals at least, she would not feel any sorrow for. Their horses perhaps, as they were truly innocent in war, but their riders had been content to send thousands to their deaths in the name of expediency and their own selfish appetites.

Even so, there were more than nine hundred, perhaps even a thousand men who were not like Tzimisces and whom she had slain in a matter of seconds. They would be alive even now if not for her. Alive and killing Feodor.

She had not done the right thing, merely the least wrong. At least, she hoped so.

As if to test her new resolve, Kalla saw more boomers falling upon the enemy. Feodor's engineers, encouraged by the emphatic, if belated, proof that their terrible weapons *did* work, launched them with a will. A heavy hail, fed by a dozen catapults from a mountain of brown spheres, fell in a steady barrage directly upon the very thickest of the army.

There was no time for thought. Feodor's words came back to her; the enemy had to be defeated, not just decisively but *utterly*, so there was no fear they would fall back into the forests or mountains and become a menace for future times.

As each boomer fell, she exploded it in the air – that had been Feodor's hope after all – and tried not to watch as the air bursts proved so much more deadly than the ground explosions. Whereas the grounded boomers had killed 80 packed men, when exploded at just above head height the unobstructed blast could cut down a hundred or more, running men through with lethal fragments at three dozen paces and opening terrible holes in the writhing army.

Again and again, Kalla acted, spreading death like a sheet until the valley was nothing but smoke and its basin thick with dead men, some lying with their mounts.



\* \* \*

Kalla felt weak again after her part in the battle, weak in spirit as well as flesh, but managed to stay in her perch without falling. She recovered her physical strength as she had before, although the sky was still overcast.

*So it can't be the sun,* she thought.

But she still felt the horror of the battle – the horror of what she had wrought.

It had been *necessary*, she knew. But that didn't make it feel any better. She wondered whether Feodor and his officers realized what had *really* happened. She kept her ears cocked; they were within earshot.

"Fortune has favored us today, Sebastos," Kalla heard Hypatius tell him. "With Tzimisces among the dead, they will have neither the head nor the heart to continue."

*Fortune indeed,* Kalla thought. Should I let them believe that?



There was talk of pursuit, of crushing what was left of the invading army between Feodor's forces and those moving up from the south. For the time being, Feodor's men held the bridge, and the surviving Gregoras troops – fewer than half the number they had fielded less than an hour before – had withdrawn hundreds of strides southwards.

Teams of huskier men were making their way to and fro across the field, picking up enemy bodies, carrying them to the river, and flinging them in. Burying them would take too long, she knew, and from what she had learned of the incidence of what they called "sickness" on this world, it was a necessary measure. But she suspected that it was also calculated to further dishearten the surviving enemy.

As soon as she saw an opportunity to do so out of sight, Kalla descended, then took a roundabout route to the villa, where Feodor would be expecting to find her. Rulav and Gerta were there, of course... and Nadezhda, who glared at her but said nothing.

They must think I've been in town, she thought. Word will have reached there.

"Victory is ours," Kalla told them, trying her best to lend her voice a sense of relief, and Rulav's and Gerta's eyes lit up.

"I wish I'd been there to see it," Rulav said.

*No you don't, Kalla thought. You don't have any idea.*

Rulav quickly spread the word among the refugees, who had been put up in the spare rooms of the villa, and even the main dining hall and Hypatius' study. Most cheered loudly, others just gave sighs of relief. But after that, Rulav retired to the sidelines.

It was hours later that Feodor returned with Hypatius, and an escort of several men from the drungos who, the catapan said, had especially distinguished themselves in battle. The refugees soon crowded around them.

“The enemy have raised their shields above their heads,” Feodor announced. “We have accepted their surrender, and our men are disarming them. We have pledged them safe conduct back to shore.”

Some of the refugees applauded the news, but others protested.

“Kill them all!” a raggedly-dressed man shouted. “You should deal with them as they dealt with our countrymen in Segilla!”

Hypatius tried to calm him, and others like him. “Who can say which among them did what at Segilla?” he asked. “Who can we find to pass fair judgment? In any case, Feodor has given his word.”

Those who remained unconvinced were reduced to sullen silence, while those who were now convinced or already had been made professions of loyalty. One man among them made a perfect fool of himself as he bowed obsequiously to Feodor and intoned “Our Patriarch!” as if we were in church and invoking the Lord.

“I will have no man bow to me,” Feodor reproved him gently. “The men who took the field today knew that they were fighting for themselves and their families and their neighbors and their countrymen, and not just for him who sits on a throne.”

“Would that I could have fought for you today,” the man insisted. “Perhaps I shall yet have the chance.”

“Your spirit is to be commended, but I hope that shall not be necessary.”

The man melted into the crowd as other refugees moved closer to Feodor to offer their thanks to him, Hypatius and the heroes of the day who now accompanied them.

“Rulav!” he called, spotting his younger brother at the fringe of the crowd. “You should join the celebration. You played a part in this, even if it was from behind the lines.”

Rulav blushed, but came to join him anyway. One of the soldiers was showing off his sword, nicked and bloodstained, when someone suddenly jostled him and grabbed it out of his hand.

It was the very man who had bowed to him before, only now he lunged at the Patriarch but, missing his mark and his footing, stabbed Rulav in the leg. Rulav fell to the ground bleeding heavily, and crying in agony.

Nadezhda screamed, and ran to her son’s side.

The other soldiers made quick work of the traitor, even as Feodor and Hypatius knelt down to see to his victim.

“His bleeding must be stopped,” Hypatius said. “Send for a healer.”

“I’ll go,” said Gerta.

“There isn’t time!” cried Feodor.

“I’m a fast runner.”

“One of the soldiers—”

“There might be more treachery afoot,” said Gerta, and sped off.

Kalla, on the sidelines, tried to remember what she had learned of dealing with wounds, from the Scalantrans and here. *Pressure*, that was one thing. *Disinfection*, that was another.

She ripped a piece off her heavy winter dress as if it were tissue,

“Let me bandage him,” she cried. She tied the heavy cloth tight and stanching the bleeding. But what if the sword had been infected?

“Hurts,” Rulav moaned, “Oh God, it hurts.”

“It may hurt more,” she said to him in a low voice. She knew that heat killed the kind of invisible creatures that spread sickness, but too much heat... She had an idea; keeping her hand pressed against his leg, she summoned her heat vision and directed it at herself. She made it look as if she were only applying pressure to the wound but...

“Warm,” moaned Rulav.

“Kalla?” asked Feodor.

“Hot,” Rulav cried seconds later.

“What do you think you’re doing?” shouted Nadezhda. “Let go of him, you—”

“Burning!” screamed Rulav.

Then Kalla did let go, hoping that it was neither too soon nor too late. A wisp of steam came out of the bandage, which was already bloody – but the blood had dried, and no more came.

Rulav was still moaning in pain, but he didn’t seem to be slipping away.

The soldiers and the refugees had been talking among themselves, Kalla hadn’t paid any attention, but she thought Hypatius must be speaking for them.

“I don’t understand what I’m seeing here, Sebastos,” he said.

“Let’s get him into the house, into bed,” said Feodor. And to the crowd, “Please make way for us.”

Once inside the villa, Hypatius insisted on lending his own bed to Rulav. Kalla followed them into the catapan's bedchamber, and Nadezhda followed Kalla.

"Please close the door behind you, mother," Feodor said, then helped Hypatius get Rulav into bed, where they did their best to make him comfortable. Hypatius poured a draft of strong liquor for him, thinking that might ease his pain; the young man thanked him in a faint voice and managed to get it down.

"Well," said the catapan, turning to Feodor.

Feodor looked at Kalla and Kalla looked at Feodor.

"What I am about to tell you must not leave this room," the Patriarch said. "Kalla has... certain abilities. I suspect that we have just observed one of them. I also suspect that it was not just fortune that smiled on us today, when the rain came. Am I right?"

"The boomers," Hypatius said, in sudden realization. "We feared their wicks..."

"I did... only what I *had* to, Sebastos," Kalla said.

"Do you understand why none but us must know of this?"

"I understand, Sebastos."

"Do you understand, Hypatius?"

"As the Sebastos wishes."

"And you, mother?"

"Are you telling me that... she... saved my son, and that she will not receive any credit for it?"

"She saved more than that, and seeks no credit for it. Is that not so?"

"It is even so, Sebastos."

"Well, can you accept my gratitude, at least?" asked Nadezhda.

“I can accept that.”

A few minutes later, Gerta arrived with a healer. He was surprised to learn that his services weren't needed, but left some medicines to ease Rulav's pain and speed his recovery.

“What's been happening here?” Gerta asked.

“It's a long story,” said Feodor. “And not to be shared outside present company.”

\* \* \*

When all was told, Feodor took Kalla aside.

“I must thank you for disobeying me this morning... and all the rest.”

“I only wish to serve you, Sebastos,” she said. And she realized that her feeling of horror was fading, in the knowledge of what she had saved.

“Modesty does not become you.”

“Then let us to bed, and both be as immodest as possible.”

## **15. Endgame at Ethrata**

As Feodor's forces approached Ethrata, they saw no signs of life but clear signs of destruction. The town outside the Keep appeared to be deserted; some of the homes and shops burned, others looted – bits of clothing, household goods and merchandise scattered about.

It had been a long journey, but not as long as they had expected. Feodor had detailed some of his themata to guard the prisoners outside Nesalonika; the fence had been extended to enclose the entire hollow, with gates at both ends for traffic along the

Great Northern Road. The guards were armed with spitters, and the Gregoran soldiers knew what that meant.

Marching southward, Feodor's main force joined the soldiers of the inner themes and continued on to confront Festus' army, which they knew they now outnumbered at least two to one – and they'd brought a dozen spitters. But the Gregorans seemed to melt away as they approached, and the few who did try to put up a fight soon changed their minds when the weaponeers began picking them off.

"We'll have to hunt them down somehow," Feodor told Hypatius. "But we can't stop for that now. We have to find out what's happened ahead."

The Keep itself seemed at first deserted. The gates were shut, with was no sign of guards. Perhaps the Gregoras family had fled, Kalla thought, just like his army and the townspeople that army had abused. Festus and his retainers could have taken Jayar with them, taken ship, gone back whence they'd come, across the Western Sea.

Feodor must have echoed her thoughts. He looked bitter, even in face of triumph.

"Have I failed, after all?" he said. "Will I have to get another wife, another son?"

He looked at her tenderly.

"Would that *you* could be her," he whispered, that none other might hear.

Kalla was touched, knowing that it was impossible. Yet before she could pursue that thought, there was a commotion on the parapet above them: Festus and several of his soldiers... and Helena, holding her infant to her breast.

Festus looked down at them contemptuously.

"The Patriarch and his whore," he shouted at them. "Or is she your witch? Is she the one behind the devilish weapons of which we have word?"

There were murmurs among the ranks of the themata.

“Have you remained here only to hurl insults?” Feodor replied calmly. “A small comfort, I imagine, when you could have lived a while longer had you gone home. Die you shall in any case, but here and now rather than there and then. You shall have the comfort of knowing that I shall spare your daughter, at least, to live out her days in your ancestral home. You may now order your men to open the gates.”

“Think you so? You can take this place, and me, and do with me what you will; but not before I avenge myself before your eyes.”

Festus suddenly snatched the infant from Helena’s arms, and held him up over his head. His men produced bows and aimed them at Feodor and Kalla and the front ranks of the themata.

Time seemed to come to a stop, except for Kalla. She guessed what Festus was about to do – and what she must do. Feodor could do nothing to prevent it, nor could anyone else. It came down to her.

She threw off her necklace barely a heartbeat before Festus threw down the child, and leaped into the air to catch him. Festus stared in disbelief, but only for a second as a volley of arrows turned him and his men into pincushions. Helena fainted.

Kalla hovered in the air for a moment, then descended softly to the ground and handed the infant Jayar to his father. Feodor nodded to her, and whispered in her ear.

“Now we must both rise to the occasion.”

She understood. Embracing him and holding Jayar between them, she rose into the air before the troops, landing in an embrasure halfway up the wall.



Feodor's retainers were struck dumb with wonder, but the Patriarch himself was calm and decisive. Turning to the themata, he held the baby up before them.

"Here is your future," he said. "Embrace that future even as I embrace this child, whom I love as I love this world. Know that this terrible war is over, and that there will be no more. Know that your children and your children's children will enjoy all the fruits of their labor and all the pleasures of their lives. I promise it. My son will keep that promise after me, and then his son. Let joy reign throughout the land!"

He paused for a moment.

"You have been witness today that my companion Kalla is more than she seems. You will learn more of this in due time. But know this now: she loves our world as much as any of us, and it is out of that love that she revealed herself today. Let her be praised with great praise."

A torrent of voices sounded from the throng of soldiers. It began as an incoherent roar, but after a few moments settled into a mass chant.

***"Feodor! Kalla! Feodor! Kalla!"***

Continued at: <http://www.brightempire.com/Empress-2.pdf>